The White Death

and Other Ghastly Ghost Stories

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TEN DARK TALES

A reluctant candy striper suffers through a night from hell in what was once a tuberculosis sanatorium.

Are a young mother-to-be's frightening visions for real?

The spirit of an English girl searches for her father during the London Blitz.

Two cousins fight over a cherished doll - with disastrous results.

The vengeful ghost of a murdered child haunts a southern plantation.

A woman is forced to face her demons - from this world and the next.

A construction worker gets more than he bargained for when he bets against a cursed antique.

A sports car changes a nerdy teenager's life.

The spirits of a mysterious woman's dead children haunt a playground.

An Appalachian girl hatches a plan to summon her dead lover's spirit by using a special kind of magic.

DEDICATION

This collection is dedicated to my late father, who loved spine-tingling ghost stories, and inspired me to tell them.

And to the memory of my friend Sara J. Larson - a unique and special lady who left us far too soon.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to my friends and sister "horror belles" - Nicole Cushing, Rhonda Wilson and Michele Lee - for unwavering support and stimulating conversations.

And thanks, also, to Neil Davies, for continuing to encourage me through the years. I'll always appreciate it.

The White Death

Brenda Morris climbed out of her foster mother's brand new '64 Buick Riviera and slammed the passenger door shut. She was supposed to have Thursday nights off, but the old bat was forcing her to fill in for another candy striper that'd gotten sick at the last minute.

Yeah, sick of working at a geriatric sanitarium, probably.

Brenda stalked away from the car without bothering to wave goodbye and headed towards the institution's imposing main entrance.

She took a deep breath, savoring the brisk October air, and gazed up at the gothic monstrosity that was Woodhaven. A full moon hung so low over the hilltop structure that it appeared to teeter upon the bell-tower.

She stood still for a moment to admire the effect. "That's just so *bitchin'*."

A whirlwind of dry leaves skittered past her, and she exhaled slowly. No use putting it off any longer.

Brenda entered the ornate lobby and wrinkled her nose. One never got used to the cool mustiness and the smell of stale urine. Quite often, the pitiful moans of elderly residents could be heard echoing down the long hallways.

No wonder the place was short staffed.

Brenda climbed the winding staircase to the second floor. Before beginning her rounds, she paid a visit to one of the restrooms to wash her hands and run a comb through her auburn curls. She smiled ruefully at her reflection in the smudged mirror. The red and white striped apron made her look like a sweet, innocent fifteen-year-old.

Brenda's foster mother – her seventh in so many years – no doubt wished it were true. The witch had busted her one too many times for smoking and sneaking out at night to meet up with The Wrong Crowd. She'd given Brenda an ultimatum: Volunteer at one of the local hospitals several evenings a week or spend some time in Juvenile Hall.

Brenda had picked Woodhaven because her dark nature was drawn to its morbid history. For several depressing decades it had been used as a sanatorium for those suffering from The White Death. Tuberculosis had claimed thousands of lives here – not including the suicides it had provoked among patients and nurses alike.

But I'd rather die of a disease than grow old and useless, Brenda thought, leaving the restroom. She could hear a woman yelling just down the hall.

It was Mrs. Hauser in Room 212.

"Somebody help! She took it away! It's mine and she stole it from me!"

Brenda reached the room and paused in the doorway, grimacing at the all too familiar sight. The old lady stood by her bed stark naked. She stared at Brenda with watery gray eyes full of righteous anger.

"Mrs. Hauser, calm down and tell me what happened." Brenda hurried over and grabbed a blanket off the bed to wrap around the woman's cold, saggy body.

"A strange little girl took my new robe. My pretty blue robe is gone – it's gone and I want it back now!"

Brenda sighed. Mrs. Hauser was hallucinating again. It was probably another patient – they were always "borrowing" things from one other.

"Okay, stay here and I'll go look for it. I'm sure the girl didn't go very far."

Brenda went back out into the hall, and a noise caused her to glance right, towards the elevator. Just before the doors slid shut she caught a glimpse of something blue.

Here we go.

Brenda hurried over and punched the UP button. Catching the person would be easier now. For some freaky reason, every elevator in the building insisted on visiting the basement first, no matter what floor was chosen.

She wasn't really bothered by this fact – it just made the place more interesting.

Brenda listened to the distressing hum of the contraption as it ascended. It passed the first floor and then stopped. The doors opened slowly.

Empty. This meant the thief had gotten out on the basement level.

Well, they are loony, after all.

Brenda rode the elevator down and waited impatiently for the doors to open. When they did, she was grateful to see that the hall light had been left on. At least the morgue was located clear over on the other side of the basement.

Not that she was afraid of dead people. What could they do? It was the live ones that were scary.

As she exited the elevator, Brenda heard a cough behind her. She turned and looked as the doors began to close, but she saw no one.

"Great, now *I'm* hearing things."

She let out a sigh and began walking down the dimly lit corridor, shivering slightly from the damp chill that hung in the air.

A few storage rooms were located on the right side of the hall, but she knew they were kept locked. The only open room was the janitor's "office," just ahead on the left. The light was on inside.

"Big girls don't cry, big girls don't cry."

The sudden blaring of a radio made Brenda jump. It was Frankie Valli and The Four Seasons.

"Bi-ig girls do-on't cry-yi-yi (they don't cry), bi-ig girls do-on't cry (who said they don't cry?)."

Brenda stopped in the doorway of the break room, expecting to see the janitor, but there was no one around.

The radio played on.

Somebody's trying to play a trick on me. Bet they're hiding under the table.

Brenda started across the room, and suddenly noticed the small red splatters on the concrete floor. Blood?

Maybe it was just paint.

She followed the trail over to a large oak table that sat against the south wall. An ancient radio rested on top.

"Big Girls Don't Cry" faded out and then Brenda heard nothing but static. She reached across the table to hit the OFF switch, just as a child's voice came out of the radio.

"I'm right behind you."

Brenda stifled a scream and whirled around. The light overhead began to flicker on and off and in the doorway Brenda saw a tall, gaunt-looking woman wearing a blue robe. She was holding the hand of a little girl with long, black hair. The child was dressed in a white hospital gown.

Brenda forced herself to remain calm.

This place simply has old wiring. The woman is a patient here and the little girl is just visiting. They're playing games, trying to scare me.

The basement lights went out for a full five seconds. When they flickered back on, the doorway was empty.

Brenda sprinted out into the hall and saw the woman and child get into the elevator. The little girl waved at her as the doors closed.

It wasn't fear Brenda was feeling now – just plain old irritation. She jabbed the DOWN button and watched the elevator stop on the first floor. When it began to descend again, she knew where she needed to go.

The stairwell was on her left. Brenda figured it would be quicker to fly up the steps than to wait and ride the unreliable rattletrap.

She burst out into the first floor hallway, panting hard. The place was eerily quiet – all the patient room doors were shut. Brenda noticed there wasn't even anyone on duty at the nurse's station, located at the far end of the hall.

She noticed something else too. The heavy steel door to the draining room was standing ajar.

When she'd first arrived at Woodhaven, Brenda had been told about the room's gruesome history. She'd sneaked in there shortly afterwards, but the only things that remained from the past were the metal poles that the TB victims used to hang from. The corpses had been slit from groin to sternum so their infectious body fluids could drain out before they were sent on to the mortuary.

Twisted and fascinating.

Brenda approached the steel door and pulled it open, preparing herself for the loud, screeching noise it made. She reached in and flipped on the light switch.

Of course, it wouldn't work.

Brenda remembered there was a single light bulb hanging from the center of the ceiling, but she couldn't see the chain. She walked forward a few steps, and then heard a child cough on the other side of the dark room. She knew they were both in there.

"Look, Mrs. Hauser just wants her new robe back. You give it to me and I won't tell anyone what happened, okay?"

No answer. They were just trying to mess with her head, but she could play that game even better.

"Okay. Maybe I'll just lock the two of you in here, since you like the dark so much."

A sudden inky blackness fell over Brenda like a suffocating cloak. The light from the doorway was gone, but she hadn't heard the steel door shut.

She took a deep breath. *A temporary power failure, that's all. The generators will kick on soon.*

Brenda laughed nervously. "I'm not scared yet, are you?"

The little girl coughed again. And then the room became filled with the sound of labored breathing.

It became so loud that Brenda had to cover her ears. She backed up, trying to find the doorway, but ran into the concrete wall instead.

Lord, where was it? Where was the way out?

A chokingly foul stench polluted the air now. It made her want to vomit.

Brenda went into full panic mode, running back and forth along the wall, her hands searching for the doorway.

How could this be happening?

The heavy breathing slowed; the sound became softer, more pitiful.

Brenda screamed when something cold and slimy touched her bare ankle. She tried to kick it away, but the snake-like thing encircled her leg, slithering up to her knee.

Brenda sobbed, falling backwards onto the hard floor. She grabbed at the thing's soft, squishy flesh, trying to pry it off, but somehow it held strong.

It pulled her towards the center of the room, into a sluggish, putrid stream of what felt like human tissue and blood.

"No, oh, God, no," she wailed. "This isn't real!"

Brenda heard a soft click, and the bare bulb in the center of the ceiling began to glow, shedding a dim light over the horrific scene around her.

The tall, thin woman in the blue robe stood directly underneath the chain. Her sunken, dead eyes stared at Brenda. Naked, draining corpses hung upside down from the metal poles, surrounding them both.

"Our fate is yours," the woman said. Her voice sounded hollow, far away.

Brenda lay in a fetal position on the icy-cold floor, bathed in bodily fluids, entangled in entrails. She couldn't scream anymore – it hurt

too much to breathe. Her lungs felt like they were on fire.

She prayed, begging God to let her lose consciousness, and was on the verge of fainting when the bare light bulb above her went out.

To her left, the steel door stood wide open, the light from the hallway cutting a deep slice into the pitch-blackness of the draining room.

The woman, the corpses, the stench and bloody filth – all were gone now.

Brenda couldn't stop herself from coughing and choking, but she mustered up the strength to crawl over to the door and pull herself up.

It hurt so bad. She wiped her mouth, and her hand came away smeared with blood.

Brenda's vision blurred. "No."

It couldn't be. Maybe she was losing her mind, but she wasn't sick. She needed to find help.

As if in answer to her prayer, a nurse hurried by, heading away from the elevator towards the north wing. Brenda stumbled out into the hall, smiling in relief.

"Please, can you help me? Something's wrong. I don't understand what's happening."

The nurse stopped walking, but didn't turn around. Brenda heard a loud crack, like a bone snapping, and the woman's head suddenly tilted to the left at an unnatural angle.

She turned around slowly, and Brenda gasped, backing away from her.

"It's The White Death," the ghost said, in a low, raspy voice. Her face was a ghastly

greenish-gray color.

Brenda tried to scream, and violently coughed up more blood – splattering the front of her candy striper uniform.

The nurse approached her at a steady pace. “You need us, Brenda. Don’t be afraid.”

The tall woman in the blue robe stepped out of the draining room into the hall.

Brenda rushed past her and tried to open the door to the stairwell. It was locked.

She sank to the floor, crying.

The dead women were walking, side-by-side, down the hall towards her.

“No, please. Leave me alone.”

Brenda crawled over to the elevator. Just as she reached it, the doors slid open.

The dark haired child greeted her with a sad smile. The front of her white hospital gown was now stained crimson.

“Shhh. Big girls don’t cry.” She grabbed Brenda’s arms and easily pulled her into the elevator.

Brenda had no strength left. She lay there, struggling to breathe, and watched helplessly as the doors closed.

The little girl pushed the button for the fifth floor and this time the elevator immediately began to ascend.

“My name is Katie,” the spirit child said. She sat down on the floor and stared at Brenda, her face pasty-white. “Mama says you need a real family. Would you like to be my big sister?”

“I…can’t…die,” Brenda gasped out.

"Shhh." Katie began stroking Brenda's damp hair. "It hurts to be sick, but Mama can help you, just like she helped our nurse, Miss Nora. You'll see."

Jesus, please, let me wake up. Let this be a nightmare.

Another violent coughing spell caused Brenda's body to convulse in pain. She tasted more blood.

Katie stood up as the elevator doors slid open. A rush of cool air swept over them.

The fifth floor was also the rooftop. Room 502 stood empty and alone in the center, beneath the bell-tower. It was where the mentally ill TB patients had once been housed.

Katie dragged Brenda out of the elevator into the moonlight. Two figures emerged from the shadows - the hideous nurse and the ghost in the blue robe.

But Brenda was past caring. She was about to lose consciousness.

The nurse knelt over and spoke in her low, raspy voice. "Alma will take away your pain now."

The world started to spin.

"I promise it'll be okay soon." Katie rested her head on Brenda's shoulder. "Mama's going to help you."

Brenda closed her eyes and felt a numbing, icy chill settle over her body. It seeped inside her, and all the pain disappeared. She could breathe normally again.

Am I finally waking up from this nightmare?

Brenda opened her eyes and tried to move, but she had no control over her limbs.

The nurse was holding Katie’s hand. Alma was gone.

The child smiled down at Brenda. “You’ll be part of our family now.”

The entity inside of Brenda grew stronger, forcing her to stand. Brenda’s mind was growing numb with fear, from denial, but still she tried to fight the possession.

It did no good.

Brenda realized she was walking – slow steps towards the edge of the rooftop.

Almost there.

A Hunter’s Moon filled the velvet-black sky, and a crisp breeze tossed around her auburn curls. She could hear the wind playing in the naked treetops.

Brenda reached the roof’s edge, but was unable to tear her gaze away from the brilliant moon. It seemed so close – close enough to touch.

She stepped forward into the mellow darkness.

Little White Casket

It first appeared in the Garden District on a warm, breezy March morning – three days after Mardi Gras.

Darla Jamison sat talking with her sister-in-law at a glass-topped table in front of LaRue's Coffeehouse, directly across the street from the wrought-iron gates of Lafayette Cemetery.

"So, have you decided on a theme for the baby shower yet?" Crystal asked. "I need to know soon."

In three months, I'll be a mother, Darla thought, feeling giddy.

She smiled at Crystal. "How about the Hundred Acre Wood - just like the nursery?"

"Well, I'm glad that's settled." Crystal retrieved a hair band from her voluminous purse and tied back her loose, red curls. "I'll get started on the invitations this weekend."

Darla leaned back in her uncomfortable chair and sipped her decaffeinated latte. The first six months of her pregnancy had boogied on by, but she knew the last trimester would feel like the longest. Crystal gleefully reminded her of this fact every time they got together.

"How did Ryan's recital go last night?" Darla asked. She watched a tour group enter the cemetery and disappear behind a row of aboveground tombs.

"Better than expected. I think he even surprised himself."

A gust of wind blew a lock of Darla's wavy, black hair into her eyes and she pushed it away impatiently, blinking. Was that a casket sitting just inside the cemetery gates? A crowd of happy leftover tourists ambled by, obscuring her view. She looked over at her sister-in-law and sighed.

"I'm sorry Kenneth and I couldn't make it. I came down with a killer headache and he had a deposition that ran late."

"Oh, don't worry. There'll be plenty more of those before school lets out for the summer."

Darla glanced across the street again and her breath caught in her throat. A little white casket sat on the ground, right outside the cemetery gates. Had it moved?

That was just your imagination, silly. A funeral must be getting ready to start – a child's funeral. How terribly sad.

Darla had been devastated by two miscarriages before her latest pregnancy. She didn't even want to imagine what it would be like to lose a child after it was born. How could anyone deal with the grief?

"Yoo-hoo. Darla? Are you in there?"

Darla tore her gaze away from the pitiful little casket and met Crystal's amused stare.

"Are you okay, honey? Maybe you should go back to drinking caffeine, just a bit."

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On a sunny morning two weeks later, Darla left her three-story brick townhouse in the French Quarter – also known as the *Vieux Carré* – for her daily walk to Jackson Square. She waddled slowly down St. Ann Street towards the Mississippi. Traffic was light for a change – a relief, since she had trouble crossing the road in a hurry.

She approached the busy corner of St. Ann and Bourbon, listening to a love-struck songbird and sniffing the mild breeze. Someone was brewing chicory-flavored coffee in an antique shop. Somewhere above her, beyond one of the many wrought iron balconies, a sax player with no talent insisted on murdering a famous jazz tune.

Four blocks down the way, Darla turned right onto Chartres and passed by the impressive St. Louis Cathedral before entering the Square. She found a shaded bench and plopped onto it to relax for a few minutes and do some people watching.

Her stomach growled as she sat there, and she rubbed her extended belly with both hands.

"How would you like some yummy beignets today, Haley Marie?" she said out loud, hoping that the nearby *Café du Monde* wasn't as jam-packed as usual. "We've both been good lately, so I think we deserve a treat."

An elderly lady passing by smiled down at her indulgently. People overlooked all sorts of

eccentric behavior if you were young, glowing and pregnant.

Darla stretched and smiled. Straight across from her were two little girls jumping rope. One day, in the not-too-distant future, she would bring her own daughter here to play.

Her smile faded when the girls moved on and she noticed a rectangular box sitting on the picnic table they had just been playing around.

My God. It's a little white casket. Just like the one at Lafayette Cemetery.

Darla's heart beat a frantic rhythm against her chest. She closed her eyes and opened them again.

It was still there.

But it can't be. It can't be real.

Darla looked around. No one else seemed to notice the ghastly object.

She struggled to her feet and approached the picnic table, fighting a flood of people moving in the opposite direction. When she broke through the wave, the casket was gone.

***

It was stress. It had to be. That was the only logical explanation.

Ha! But you aren't always logical, are you, Darla? What about that little trip to Marie Laveau's grave, right after you found out you were pregnant for the third time?

Darla had left the "Queen" a long-stemmed white rose as an offering and had wished for a

normal pregnancy, a healthy baby – hoping for a little voodoo protection from one Creole to another.

"As I've said before, everything seems perfectly fine." Dr. Bradshaw stepped back from the examining table and draped the stethoscope around his neck. "You and your baby are in great shape."

Darla watched a little brown spider drop from the light fixture above their heads, spiraling gracefully down to land on the old doctor's shoulder.

He didn't notice the leggy intruder, and for some reason she didn't warn him.

Darla straightened her "Baby on Board" T-shirt.

"I'm sorry I'm so paranoid," she said, sitting up. "I just don't want anything to go wrong."

Dr. Bradshaw peered down at her from over the top of his rimless glasses. "Now, there's no need to be nervous at this late stage. Both your miscarriages occurred before you were four months along."

Darla nodded. "You're right. I'm being a pest. Should I come back for my regular appointment in two weeks?"

"By all means. We want to stay on schedule and keep track of your progress."

He smiled as she hopped off the examining table. "And try not to worry, all right? Stress isn't good for the baby."

***

She'd had the nightmare for three nights in a row, starting right after her seven-month checkup. At the beginning of the dream, Darla always felt warm and safe in the quiet darkness. But then she would wake up choking and gasping for air – terrified she was going to smother to death.

She could never remember why.

On that third morning, a Friday, Darla arose and put on a pair of maternity jeans and a red and white striped top. She was determined to find some chores to do that day – anything to keep her mind off the mysterious nightmare.

She ate a light breakfast and then decided to dust all three floors of the townhouse. The exercise would do her good and the cleaning lady would thank her for it the next afternoon.

The house had a lot of space for just two people, but Darla hoped that one day it would be filled with children. She loved the gracious old home, with its high ceilings and parquet floors. An elegantly curved rosewood staircase dominated the foyer.

She started her "therapy" in the third floor ballroom and worked her way down. The second floor had three large bedrooms and two full baths. (She had already transformed one of the bedrooms into a yellow nursery.) The first floor consisted of a front parlor, a formal dining room, an eat-in kitchen, a study, and a powder room.

Darla was exhausted by the time she put away the feather duster. She had to remember not to

mention the cleaning binge to Kenneth. He had ordered her not to do anything more strenuous than lifting a TV remote.

With a sigh of satisfaction, she went into the black and white kitchen and poured herself a tall glass of pineapple-orange juice. It was a perfect spring day, so she headed for the French doors at the back of the house that led to the walled-in, tree-shaded courtyard.

Darla opened one of the doors and froze. The glass of juice dropped from her numb fingers and exploded on the marble threshold.

Resting on the cast iron bench in the center of the garden was a little white casket.

Darla opened her mouth to scream, but nothing came out. She squeezed her eyes shut and mentally said three Hail Marys in a row.

When she opened her eyes again, the casket had vanished.

***

Darla knew she couldn't tell Kenneth – or anyone else. They'd think she was losing her mind, or having hallucinations because of her fear that what had happened in the past would happen again.

Maybe it really was her subconscious playing tricks on her, but she would just have to deal with the frightening visions on her own. They would certainly go away once the baby was born.

Ten days after the incident in the courtyard, Darla threw together a pot of spicy jambalaya and

invited her wealthy in-laws over for a late supper.

She'd formed a close bond with Kenneth's parents right after meeting them for the first time four years ago – as a bride of seven days. To her surprise, Cecil and Mona hadn't been unhappy with the elopement of their youngest son with a penniless, twenty-year-old waitress. They, along with Barry and Crystal and young Ryan, had become her instant family.

Darla's own mother and father had died in a house fire when she was ten. An alert neighbor had pulled her out of a bedroom window just in time. For years afterward, Darla had endured being uprooted and shuffled from one foster home to another. She'd never been abused, but she'd never been loved, either.

And that's why she refused to complain when Cecil insisted on giving her a bear hug every time they saw each other. She always let his two hundred and fifty pound frame pull away first.

"Hmmm, smell that andouille sausage." Cecil stepped past Darla, sniffing the air, and followed his petite wife into the kitchen. "When little Haley Marie starts school, I oughta set you up with your own restaurant, darlin.'"

"Ah, but it would really be *your* restaurant, wouldn't it?" Darla walked around them and stopped in front of the stove. "Anyway, thanks for the offer, but I have no desire to work in the food industry ever again."

"My dear, I understand you perfectly," Mona said, and immediately began setting the table.

“Cecil, honey, you must realize that Darla plans to have more than one child. Being a mother is a fulltime job.”

Kenneth entered the kitchen from the adjoining study and gave his mother a peck on the cheek. “I’m sure we can count on you to watch the baby for us once in a while, right, Mom?”

“My first granddaughter? Hon, you’ll be lucky if I don’t end up moving in with you.”

Cecil let out a groan and took a seat at the long oak table.

Darla smiled, noticing again how much Kenneth and Mona were alike. He had her easygoing personality and her fair-skinned, attractive features. Whenever Darla tried to imagine what Haley was going to look like, she always envisioned her with Kenneth’s sandy hair and light blue eyes.

“Need some help?” Kenneth took the two-handled pot of jambalaya away from his wife and whisked it over to the table, setting it next to the big, wooden salad bowl.

Just as Darla eased into a chair, the baby gave her a swift, hard kick in the ribs, making her gasp. “Oh, I think this child’s going to be a star soccer player one day.”

A laugh rumbled out of Cecil’s broad chest. “She’s gonna take after her daddy, all right. I can guarantee ya that.”

An hour later, the jambalaya had been devoured and Cecil, at least, was ready for dessert. Darla had picked up a Royal Red Velvet Cake at the little patisserie on the corner.

It was her father-in-law's favorite.

"Well, now, lookee what we have here." Cecil rubbed his hands together.

"Don't get too excited, honey bun," Mona said. "You can't have more than one tiny sliver."

Cecil stared at her in disbelief. "Says who?"

Mona smiled sweetly. "Says your doctor, and more importantly, your darling wife."

"Humph!" Cecil shook his head and cut himself a hefty slice of cake, causing Mona to sigh heavily.

Darla wanted to grin, but couldn't. She handed out the coffee cups and then leaned against the table, patting her swollen tummy.

"You feeling okay, sweetheart?" Kenneth's eyes were full of concern.

"Yeah, I'll be fine. I don't think that sausage agreed with me, though. If y'all will excuse me for just a minute, I'll run upstairs and see if there's something I can take to settle my stomach. Help yourselves to the coffee."

Kenneth grabbed her hand. "You sure you don't want me to come with?"

"For heaven's sake, stop fussing. I'm not an invalid."

Darla left the kitchen and headed down the short hallway to the front of the house. She started up the curving stairs, moving slowly and holding on to the smooth, shiny banister as she climbed.

When she reached the halfway point between the first and second floors, something made her look up.

Holy Mary, Mother of God.

The little white casket waited for her on the second floor landing, poised atop an old-fashioned brass cart with metal wheels. The baby coffin's wooden lid was covered with long-stemmed white roses.

No! This can't be happening.

Every muscle in Darla's body refused to work. She couldn't move or blink or scream.

All she could do was watch in horrified fascination as the cart's squeaky wheels began to move towards the stairs, taking the little white casket closer and closer to the edge. The roses began to slide off and tumble down the steps.

One of them landed at Darla's feet.

Oh, she tried to move, all right. She tried to move with every ounce of mental power she possessed.

It was impossible.

The roaring in her ears got louder as the cart went over the edge. The little white casket slid off its stand and hurtled towards her.

But Darla had already fallen into a spinning, black void.

***

"It's okay, Mrs. Jamison. Just relax."

That was a young woman's voice.

She heard other voices around her, murmuring. An older woman said, "Thank God she didn't fall down the stairs."

Thank God.

Darla opened her eyes and saw a pretty blond in a white coat bending over her.

"Ah, there you are. I'm Dr. Perry. Do you remember what happened?"

Darla slowly shook her head. "Did I faint?"

"That seems to be the consensus. We can't find anything wrong with you, though, which is good. The baby is okay. As soon as you feel up to it, your husband will be more than willing to take you home and tuck you in. He's going crazy out in the waiting room."

Darla gave her a weak smile. Poor Kenneth.

She remembered exactly what had happened to her, of course, but there was no way she was going to talk about it. She wanted to go home. She wanted to be in control again, and the only way she could do that was to figure out why she was having those awful visions.

***

Two more weeks went by and Darla still did not understand what was happening. Was it all in her head? Was she under a voodoo hex – or was God trying to tell her something?

She talked to the baby – and "listened." She made note of how often Haley kicked and squirmed.

What else could she do? No one would believe her wild, grim story.

On a Saturday evening, the day before the baby shower, Darla managed to escape from Kenneth long enough to get out of the house and take a short walk to calm her nerves. She went as far as Royal

Street. Before turning back, she lingered for several minutes outside an overstuffed bar, tapping her feet to the live zydeco music of a local band.

A cool, light rain began to fall as she headed for home. St. Ann Street looked strange and silvery in the lamplight. Steam began to rise off the cracked pavement and swirl around Darla's swollen ankles. Traffic swished by and her fellow pedestrians pulled out their umbrellas or ran for cover.

Wimps, they all were. The soft rain felt good on her tired face.

When she got to the noisy corner of Bourbon and St. Ann, Darla stopped at her favorite patisserie and bought a dozen croissants for the next morning. The elderly shopkeeper once again asked about her due date.

"Less than four weeks to go," Darla told her patiently, with a wave goodbye.

She held the bag of croissants close to her body, letting it rest on top of her stomach as she moseyed along, occasionally rubbing her aching lower back.

She was almost home when she noticed a statuesque mulatto woman moving up the sidewalk towards her – untouched by the rain.

The lady was attractive and exotic and somehow familiar. Her long, shimmering skirt whirled around her legs like a fine, blue mist. She had a white shawl draped around her shoulders, despite the humid warmth of the night. Large gold hoops dangled from her earlobes.

Darla swallowed hard when she noticed the bright blue *tignon* wrapped around the lady's head. It was a seven-knotted kerchief – just like the one Marie Laveau had always worn before her death over a century before.

Ghost stories about the voodoo queen were widely circulated in the *Vieux Carré*. She was often seen haunting St. Ann Street, where she had once lived – in a home that was only a block away from the Jamison's townhouse.

Darla stopped walking and concentrated on her breathing, trying not to hyperventilate. People moved around her and avoided the phantom without seeming to notice its presence.

Marie Laveau was getting close now. She gave Darla a Mona Lisa smile, as though she could read her thoughts and was about to say to her, "Yes, my pet, we are neighbors, you and I. You honored my grave. You gave my name to your unborn babe. Why, then, are you so surprised to see me?"

But those words were all in Darla's head.

Please go away. I can't take this anymore.

Marie kept moving forward, so quickly and gracefully that it seemed like she was floating above the ground. Her fierce black eyes were shining – and a mysterious little smile still tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Darla feared the specter intended to walk right through her motionless body, but just as they came face to face, Marie Laveau disappeared.

"Heed the warning."

The invisible entity whispered the words into Darla's right ear, causing chills to race up and

down her spine.

She hurried home, shaking uncontrollably.

***

It was well past midnight, the baby was quiet inside her, but Darla still found it impossible to sleep. She lay on her back beside her sleeping husband and stared off into the darkness, convinced that something terrible was about to happen. She could no longer deny what she knew in her heart to be true.

But how was she supposed to stop it from happening?

She wanted to toss and turn and cry, but didn't. Kenneth was resting peacefully. She could hear his deep, even breathing.

If only she could forget the things she'd seen and heard for just one night. The knowing was torture.

She finally fell asleep from sheer exhaustion.

A few hours later she awoke to the sun. White light was pouring in through the nearby window and at first she thought it was what had awakened her – until she heard the noises: footsteps above her head and soft voices.

Kenneth was still curled up next to her, sleeping heavily.

Somehow Darla shimmied out of bed without waking him, grabbed her cotton robe and slippers, and tiptoed out of the bedroom, carefully avoiding all the squeaky floorboards.

Sunshine poured into the hall from the skylight. She moved up the second flight of stairs at a steady pace, her stomach churning. When she reached the third floor landing, she was forced to pause for a few seconds to catch her breath. She could hear the somber voices more clearly now.

Darla moved towards the double doors that led to the long ballroom. Her feet felt like they were encased in buckets of concrete.

She hesitated in front of the heavy doors, and then wrenched them open with cold, trembling hands.

Darla stifled a scream. This had to be a hallucination.

The room was full of people, most of them dressed in black. She recognized a few of the men and women as employees of Kenneth's law firm.

What were they doing here?

She walked farther into the room until she was surrounded by little groups of mourners. They were huddled here and there, eating hors-d'oeuvres and drinking punch.

Darla overheard some of their remarks.

"It really is such a shame. If only they'd known about it earlier."

"That poor baby had the umbilical cord wrapped around her neck three times."

"My God. Darla must be inconsolable."

"Well, of course. That's why she couldn't even attend the funeral. I hear she's gone completely off the deep end now."

Darla heard a woman shouting and then realized the words were coming out of her own mouth.

"Shut up! All of you just shut up! It's not true!"

The room fell silent and everyone turned to stare at her.

Tears were streaming down Darla's pale cheeks. "This is not going to happen, do you hear me? I won't let it."

All this time, on the far side of the room, the mourners had hidden the little white casket. Now it rose into the air and floated above the crowd.

Darla shrank back against the wall in horror as blood began to seep out from under the coffin's closed lid and drip onto the floor – and onto the people standing below.

It moved in her direction and she sprinted for the doors.

Several mourners deliberately blocked her path.

"Why are you doing this to me?" Darla yelled.

The little white casket hovered above her now. It tilted to one side and the lid swung open, allowing the dark, clotted blood that had been festering inside to gush out.

Darla threw her arms over her head and screamed and screamed.

"Honey, stop fighting me. It's all right."

"Kenneth?"

On the chilly hardwood floor, in the middle of the empty ballroom, Darla went limp in her husband's embrace.

“You’re okay. Just calm down and tell me what happened.”

Darla took a deep, shaky breath, letting her head clear. The realization soon hit her like a blow to the stomach: Haley had not moved in several hours. Why hadn’t she noticed sooner?

She looked up at Kenneth with anguish-filled eyes. “There’s no time left. We’ve got to get to the hospital now.”

***

Kenneth practically carried her into the emergency room at Baptist Memorial.

Dr. Perry was on duty again and, despite Kenneth’s objections, Darla insisted on speaking with her alone.

“My baby hasn’t moved in hours,” she said, her voice wobbling with emotion. “There’s something very wrong.”

“We’ll run some tests right away and I’ll call your doctor.”

Darla burst into tears. “There’s no time for any of that. You have to help her now. You have to do a C-section.”

“Darla, I know you’re worried, but …”

“Please, listen to me. Do you have a child?”

Dr. Perry sighed. “A little boy, yes.”

“Haven’t you ever sensed when he was in danger? Would you want to take a chance on his life?” Darla wiped the tears off her face with the back of her hand. “I’m far enough along now to have the baby anyway. You have to trust me. I

just know Haley's going to die if we don't do something right now."

Dr. Perry stared down at her with green eyes full of confusion. It was the first longest minute of Darla's life.

"Please," she whispered, laying a hand on the doctor's arm. "I think my baby's being strangled to death inside me."

***

Haley's skin had a bluish tinge to it and she wasn't breathing when they pulled her out of the womb. After they cut away the umbilical cord that was killing her, she remained unresponsive for nearly a minute.

It felt like forever had come and gone before Darla finally heard her baby cry for the first time.

A few hours later, after her in-laws had left and Kenneth had gone in search of food, she cradled the sleeping infant in her arms and stared down at her in awe. Haley Marie weighed just over six pounds. She had gobs of black hair and dark blue eyes. She was a beautiful, perfect little human being.

Darla shivered when she thought of how close she'd come to losing her, and offered up a prayer of thanks to the heavens – and Marie Laveau.

A sudden commotion out in the hall drew her attention.

"Get ready," said a nurse to an orderly, as they trotted past Darla's room. "We'll have to

move her upstairs for her own good."

Darla could hear a woman sobbing hysterically.

A minute went by and then the same orderly walked by her door again, only this time he was pushing a pregnant, dark-haired lady in a wheelchair. Darla noticed that her wrists were strapped down.

"No, please, I'm not crazy," the woman said, still weeping. "You've got to believe me. *It was a little white casket!*"

Ghost Writer

My name is Marjory Ellen Fielding and I was ten years old when I died on the twenty-seventh of September, 1940. It happened near my home in Westminster during the London Blitz, but it wasn't the war that killed me.

That's right – I'm a ghost, though I won't be one for much longer. More than anything, I want to tell my story while I still have time – but first, allow me to explain how you came to be reading my Afterlife Journal. I think it's simply brilliant that it was found by you, since I'm going to so much trouble to get the pages written. Possessing sleepwalkers isn't as easy as you might think. I must rely on children to get the job done.

And only girls. Squirming around inside a boy's body would make me feel most improper. Anyway, I can only stay inside my hosts for an hour or two at a time. The plan is always to write as quickly as I can and then hide what I've written in a safe place. The lucky ducks don't even know I was around when they wake up in their beds the next morning.

Clever, yes?

Perhaps you're wondering why I refused to cross over to the other side. Although I longed

to see my mum, who died when I was two, I had an important reason for staying earthbound and avoiding Heaven.

I couldn't leave my father alone, could I? Well, I suppose technically I already had when I got killed by that lorry driver. But that wasn't my fault. Nigel Hanley was horsing around with his schoolmates and ended up knocking me into the street. I never liked that sorry sod before the accident, and you can imagine how I feel about him now.

I don't think my father ever forgave Nigel. Daddy had treated me like a princess. I was all he had left. Sometimes I'd see tears well up in his eyes when he kissed me goodnight. I became even more special to him as time went on because the older I got, the more I looked like my mum with my blond, curly hair. I'd even inherited her odd eyes – one blue and one green.

Not to boast, but I was very fortunate to have Mummy's good looks and my father's keen intelligence. What a pity my life had to be cut so drastically short.

At least dying wasn't painful for me – it was over in an instant. In a way, passing on is like being reborn. Your only worry is learning how to exist on a different plane and still affect the world around you. Baby steps. It takes time for a spirit to grow strong.

I think I adjusted to the changes much faster than most ghosts my age. And when I felt confident enough, I went searching for my daddy.

The first place I looked was our old home on Marigold Court in Westminster. The war was almost over by then, and it was sad to see how many buildings had been damaged by the German bombing raids. A crumbling chimney and some stone steps were all that remained of our neighbor's place. Our house seemed perfectly normal - except for one thing.

My father didn't live there anymore. Strangers had moved in and everything looked different. My once pink bedroom belonged to a teenage boy – an obnoxious, pimply-faced slob who reminded me of Nigel.

If I hadn't been so anxious to find my father, I would have lingered long enough to scare him senseless.

Another month would pass before I found Daddy outside the church we used to attend – St. Jude's Cathedral. The sun shone brightly on the quiet churchgoers as they filed out of the stone building onto the sidewalk. I believe it was Easter.

Everyone had on such fetching outfits. I loved staring at the frilly dresses and fancy suits, and I couldn't help wishing I'd died wearing my Sunday best instead of a dull school uniform.

My father looked just as handsome as I remembered, except now he had a thin mustache. I wanted to run up to him and throw myself in his arms, but I knew that he couldn't see me.

I stood right next to him when he paused at the bottom of the church steps. He seemed to be

waiting for someone.

"I love you, Daddy, and I've missed you so much. I wish you knew I was here."

My father smiled, almost like he'd heard me, but his eyes were on a pretty blond woman who was making her way down the uneven steps toward him. A little girl in a pink dress held tightly to her hand.

A little girl with long golden curls.

"Annabelle, my sweet," my father said, "would you like to stop at the candy shop on the way home?"

"Oh, yes, please!"

The pretty woman laughed. "Honestly, Jonathan, you're going to spoil the child rotten soon."

"Well, it's her birthday, isn't it? She deserves a special treat."

"Say yes, Mummy, please say yes!"

Her mother sighed. "One piece of candy – just one. Remember I'm making you a chocolate birthday cake this afternoon."

"Will I have candles, too?"

"Of course you will," my father replied. "Five pink candles."

The three of them walked away from the church, hand in hand.

I decided right then that I hated Annabelle. I hated her with all my heart.

***

They lived three blocks over from St. Jude's, on Calistoga Street. I followed them to their brick townhouse and stepped right through the polished oak door after Daddy shut it in my face.

The blond lady headed for the winding staircase. "Come along, poppet. We need to change clothes so we can bake your cake."

Annabelle charged up the steps behind her.

"Miriam, I'll be in the study for an hour or so," my daddy said.

"Don't worry – I'll let you know when lunch is ready."

My father had been a busy barrister when I was alive. But he'd always made time for me on Sundays.

The ground floor study was at the back of the townhouse. While Daddy sat at his messy desk, reading through files, I wandered around the room looking at all the framed photographs.

The first picture I saw showed my father, Miriam and Annabelle standing together on the front steps of the townhouse. Miriam had on a pale lacy dress and was holding a bright bouquet of flowers. My daddy was wearing a dark suit. Annabelle must have been the flower girl. Dry leaves littered the ground, so the wedding had probably taken place the previous autumn.

The last photograph I noticed was of me and my smiling mother, Ellen, which had been taken when I was just an infant.

Daddy had a new family now, and I wanted to cry.

***

Witnessing Annabelle's birthday dinner made me even more depressed. I tried to remember my tenth birthday party the summer before I died, but the details were fuzzy in my mind. That may have been the year Daddy had given me a black kitten named Dickens.

Annabelle got a new doll that looked just like her. She called it Sally.

While the three of them had pasta for supper, I sat atop the buffet and stared at the doll in Annabelle's lap. I wondered if I could possess it for a short time to make the evening more entertaining.

Then I had a better idea. Why couldn't I possess my stepsister instead?

***

I discovered that possessing the living is much easier to do when they're asleep. As soon as Annabelle went to bed, her belly full of chocolate cake, I hovered above her little bed, just waiting for her to drift off to dreamland.

It didn't take long.

I fell into her body, and at first everything felt dark and cramped. But then I learned to stretch myself, slowly getting comfortable and confident enough to open Annabelle's eyes and move her arms and legs.

I got out of bed and carefully made my way down the carpeted stairs, holding up Annabelle's

long pink nightgown so I wouldn't trip.

Both my father and Miriam were in the sitting room. Miriam had her head down, engrossed in her knitting, and Daddy was reading a book.

They looked up at the same time, startled, when I spoke from the doorway.

"Do you miss Marjory?"

Daddy and Miriam exchanged surprised glances, and then my father laid down his pipe and motioned for me – or Annabelle – to come closer.

"Sweetheart, why would you ask such a thing?" Miriam said, leaning forward. "Are you having bad dreams?"

I shook my head.

Daddy pulled me onto his lap. "Yes, I miss Marjory. She was my daughter, too, and I wish you and your mother could have known her."

I couldn't help it – being held by my daddy again after so long without him made me start to cry.

Miriam rushed over and dabbed my face with a hanky. "Now, now, everything is all right, poppet. I can't understand why –"

She stopped in midsentence and let out a little gasp. "Jonathan, her eyes – they're different."

My father's face got a few shades paler. "My word, Miriam, you're right. One eye looks green, just like…."

"Marjory," I said, finishing his sentence.

***

Daddy and Miriam put me – Annabelle – back to bed. Nothing more was said about my stepsister's change in eye color, but the two of them looked concerned as they turned out the light and closed the bedroom door.

I knew the 'odd eye effect' was temporary, but I still thought it was splendid – mainly because I hadn't expected it.

I waited a wee bit before getting Annabelle out of bed once more. I knew it was a spiteful thing to do, but I couldn't resist hiding her doll, Sally, in the upstairs linen closet.

Then I went back to bed and popped out of my stepsister's body. It was much easier than slipping in.

Afterwards I felt so restless I decided to visit the neighbors next door. The two townhouses shared a common wall so all I had to do was step through it to enter one of the Donnelly's upstairs bedrooms.

I amused myself for a good hour by slipping into one of the twin girls sleeping in the canopy bed and playing tricks on her sister. She finally slapped me silly and I popped out to watch the hair-pulling squabble that ensued.

***

"Mummy, Mummy! I can't find Sally!"

Annabelle cried for an hour the next morning when she woke up and found her doll missing. That afternoon, Miriam accidentally discovered Sally's hiding place in the linen closet when she went

upstairs to put away the freshly laundered bed sheets.

I felt not one twinge of guilt over the matter. In fact, at dinner that evening, I once more took possession of my stepsister's body when she nodded off at the table.

I raised Annabelle's head and stared at my father. "Daddy, it's Marjory. I can't talk long, but I just wanted to ask you about my kitten. What happened to Dickens after I died?"

Daddy's fork clattered onto his plate and he looked at me strangely. Miriam clutched my father's arm.

"Annabelle, this isn't funny," Daddy said, his voice trembling. "How did you know about Marjory's kitten? Did your mother tell you?"

"Jonathan, no. I've never talked about your daughter. Honestly, darling, Annabelle couldn't know that."

Miriam went on to tell my father about how the doll had been hidden, and that my stepsister had denied doing it.

I giggled. "That was me. I put Sally in the linen closet last night after Annabelle went to sleep."

My father pushed his chair away from the table and stood. "Young lady, I think it's time you went up to your room."

"But, I thought you missed me, Daddy. Have you forgotten Mummy, too?"

My father's face turned as red as a ripe tomato. "That's enough!"

Miriam jumped out of her chair and took me in her arms. “Annabelle, sweetheart, what’s the matter with you?”

I looked her square in the eyes. “Annabelle is asleep. I’ve got to go now, but I won’t be gone long.”

When I slipped out of my stepsister’s body, she slumped against her mother’s chest.

“Are you all right, poppet?”

Annabelle stirred, opened her eyes, and yawned. “What happened, Mummy?”

***

They put my stepsister to bed and then retired to the sitting room. I decided to eavesdrop on their conversation.

Miriam paced back and forth in front of the fireplace, wringing her hands. “Her eyes, Jonathan. Her eyes had changed again, just like last night.”

My father still looked shaken. He sat in his armchair, holding a tumbler full of whisky instead of his pipe.

“I wish I understood what in blazes is going on here,” he said.

Miriam sighed. “Maybe Marjory really is with us. Maybe she’s upset because you have a new family.”

Brilliant deduction.

“Rubbish.”

Miriam stopped pacing. “Jonathan, I know my daughter. That wasn’t Annabelle talking to us at

dinner tonight."

"Humph."

"Think about it, please. I know you loved Marjory. Can't you sense her presence here somehow?"

My father took a sip of whisky and bowed his head, remaining silent.

It made me angry. I wanted him to believe. I wanted him to know I still existed.

Without thinking, I took a swipe at the oil lamp that sat on the polished table by his chair. To my amazement, it shot off the slick surface and shattered on the hardwood floor.

Starting a fire had not been my intention.

***

Daddy had ripped down the sitting room's heavy brocade curtains and had used them to smother the flames. Thankfully, hardly any damage was done, but Miriam had cried like a baby anyway.

When she and my father finally headed upstairs to bed, I snagged my stepsister's body and met them in the hallway. They stopped dead in their tracks when they saw Annabelle.

"I'm sorry, Daddy. I didn't mean to break the lamp. I just wanted you to believe in me."

My father's face wore a sad, weary expression. "Marjory, love, what you're doing isn't right. You need to move on. Your Mummy is waiting for you in Heaven."

"Please leave Annabelle alone," Miriam said. "Leave us in peace, for God's sake!"

My borrowed eyes welled up with tears. “It’s not fair. You can’t make me go away. You can’t!”

***

Over the next week, Daddy worked long hours and Miriam read every book on spiritualism and the occult that she could find.

I stayed away from Annabelle and behaved myself, hoping that my stepmother would calm down. But my hopes were dashed the following Friday morning. While Annabelle was playing at the house across the street, an elderly priest showed up at our door.

“Uncle, thank you for making time for us,” Miriam said. “We’ve decided to go through with it. The entity has been terrorizing my Annabelle for days.”

Liar. And why had she called me an entity? She knew my name.

Miriam led the priest into the front parlor.

“So troubling,” he said, shaking his head. “It’s been quite a few years since I’ve had to deal with such a matter. May God be with us.”

The priest set his black leather satchel on a corner table and took out a purple silk shawl, which he draped around his shoulders. Then he removed a rosary with a crucifix and a glass vial filled with what I assumed was holy water.

Where was Daddy? Why wasn’t he here?

Fear mixed with anger made me lose control, and a candlestick flew off the fireplace mantle, nearly hitting the back of my stepmother’s head.

She let out a strangled cry. “Did you see that, Uncle? It wants to hurt us. Please tell me you can help.”

The old man looked worried, but his voice remained steady. “I’ll do my best, child. But please understand that things might get worse before they get better. Unclean spirits are unpredictable.”

Unclean? *I* didn’t think so.

The priest said a prayer in Latin and then kissed the crucifix. Afterwards, he began walking around the room sprinkling holy water on everything. He even sprinkled it on Miriam.

I floated up to the ceiling to avoid him.

“Every room in the house must be cleansed,” he said, leaving the parlor.

Miriam trailed after him and I followed, staying a safe distance behind.

I didn’t begin to feel strange until the priest finished cleansing Annabelle’s bedroom.

Suddenly I heard a roaring sound and a dark tunnel appeared before me. I felt myself being pulled towards it by unseen hands and I couldn’t break free.

I screamed. “No! Let me go! I don’t want to leave my daddy!”

I continued to struggle in vain for what seemed like an eternity. Then, from behind me came a gentle voice, issuing a firm command.

“Release her.”

The invisible hands let go of my arms and a soft white light enveloped me. It carried me

through the wall into the neighbor's townhouse. I was safe in the twins' empty bedroom.

The white light backed away and took the shape of a woman. She looked familiar. She felt familiar.

"Marjory, my darling, don't be afraid."

Mother. It was my mother!

I flew into her arms and she hugged me close. Her white dress smelled like warm sunshine.

"Are you an angel, Mummy?"

She sat down on the bed and pulled me onto her lap.

"I used to be, but I had to leave Heaven because you needed my help."

I raised my head and looked into her odd eyes, exactly like my own. "I'm sorry."

"I know you are." She kissed my forehead. "I hope to go back soon, but first we have to fix your problem."

"Can't you stay here with me and Daddy?"

"No, and you can't stay in your father's house anymore either. It's too dangerous for you now. You might end up in Purgatory and we can't have that, can we?"

I shuddered, remembering the dark tunnel and the lost souls who'd tried to drag me inside.

"Listen to me, dearest," my mother said, rocking me back and forth. "You need to decide if you want to go to Heaven with me or be reborn as the child of your daddy and stepmother."

I stared up at her perfect face. "Can I really live again, Mummy? Can I have a new life?"

She nodded. “It’s called reincarnation. Every soul must make a choice before they cross over.”

“Will I remember who I used to be? Will I remember you?”

“No, not while you’re alive. But that’s for the best. That way you’ll be happier.”

It made sense, but there was something else I needed to ask.

“If it's not too much trouble, may I be born a girl again, please?”

***

Mummy went back to Heaven, and I was glad. She makes a beautiful angel.

It’s been hard to stay away from Daddy, but I didn’t want to get in trouble – and I had a mission to complete before my ‘reassignment.’ My mother promised it would happen soon so I had no time to waste. I could disappear at any moment. I began writing my journal using several different children on our street, including the Donnelly twins.

At last, I have come to the end. I will hide my life and death story in Daddy’s garden, wrapped in plastic with a note on the front cover.

“To Annabelle’s little sister. Now you know who you used to be."

Angeline

A somber silence had fallen over the house on Jackson Street. It was almost midnight.

Mary Stanford sat on the window seat in her third floor bedroom and stared out at the full April moon that reflected off the choppy waters of San Francisco Bay. She had expected to see a blanket of fog rolling up the hill towards Pacific Heights, and was pleased to find the night clear instead.

The moonlight would help her plan. She wouldn't need a candle to descend the stairs. Once she reached the first floor, she could light one just long enough to sneak into the front parlor and open the drapes.

Then she would rescue Angeline from the darkness of the coffin.

The thought of the beautiful doll being trapped with her cousin's rotting corpse was too much for Mary to bear. Paulette's burial was to take place the next morning. A wagon would be arriving early to transport the body to the cemetery.

If Mary's plan succeeded, Angeline would be left behind.

***

It was Saturday – just after midnight. Mary crept barefoot down the carpeted stairs, holding a small candle in one hand and using the other to hold up the skirts of her white cotton nightgown. She paused at the foot of the grand staircase on the cold slate floor – on the exact spot where Paulette had landed.

Her spoiled cousin had broken her pretty blond neck in the fall. Mary had wanted to laugh.

They'd been arguing over Angeline. Paulette had promised Mary she could have the doll for a whole day, but had reneged on the offer by noon.

Well, that was the last time Paulette would ever break a promise.

Mary lit her candle with a match stolen from her father's tinderbox. She wrinkled her nose at the strange chemical smell in the air and walked slowly into the entrance hall.

The front parlor was on her left. She paused in the doorway, listening, and could only hear the faint sound of a dog barking somewhere.

She held the candle high and tiptoed across the room to the tall windows facing the verandah. The green velvet drapes were heavy, but she managed to get them open without too much effort.

Moonlight poured into the flower-filled room. Mary blew out her candle and turned around to face her cousin's gleaming mahogany coffin.

The lid was closed. She'd heard that it had never been opened and wasn't surprised. After

all, her cousin wasn't pretty anymore.

Mary's anguished parents had tried to make her feel guilty for the "accident." If only they knew the truth.

Their twelve-year-old orphaned niece was everything they had ever wanted in a daughter. Mary, a year older, was plain, dark, and chubby – a big disappointment.

For birthdays and Christmases, Paulette got fancy dolls and frilly dresses. Mary received clothes that were a size too small, and hefty, boring books.

After five years of putting up with her parents' blatant favoritism, Mary felt she deserved a reward. She deserved Angeline.

The coffin lid wasn't as heavy as she'd feared. It opened silently.

Mary set the support rod in place and took a step to the right to avoid blocking the moonlight.

Paulette lay on the white satin with her arms wrapped around Angeline. They looked alike.

Both had long, golden curls and ivory complexions, but now dark bruises covered Paulette's damaged face. Their blue eyes were closed. They had on matching dresses and hair bows made of blue-gray silk. Mary's mother had insisted that Paulette not be separated from her favorite doll.

"Don't worry, Angeline," Mary whispered. "I won't let them bury you forever."

She grabbed hold of the porcelain doll with her right hand and pulled.

It was almost as if Paulette were holding on. Mary tugged harder and Paulette's body shifted towards her.

"Give her to me, you selfish little witch," Mary said, not bothering to whisper.

She took hold of Paulette's arm with her left hand and pried it away from Angeline. The doll was free.

Mary stepped back with a sigh of relief, and then jumped as a shrill scratching noise reached her ears.

The wind had picked up outside. A tree branch was scraping one of the parlor windows.

Mary set the doll in a nearby wingchair and tiptoed back over to the coffin. She moved aside the support rod and began lowering the lid – just as Paulette's eyelids drifted open.

Mary gasped and sprang away from the coffin. The lid fell closed with a muffled thunk.

She rushed over to the wingchair. Angeline's blue eyes were open now, too. Mary snatched the doll up and sprinted out of the room.

***

No one seemed to think anything was amiss the next morning, even though Mary had left her little candle sitting on an end table. She had also forgotten to close the drapes.

It hadn't mattered. Everyone blamed the servants. Her parents were so grief-stricken, they probably wouldn't have noticed if all the furniture had gone missing.

Mary was ordered to stay in her room and reflect on the tragedy. Her father would follow the undertaker to the cemetery, where there would be a brief service. Her distraught mother would no doubt stay in bed until evening.

That was just fine with Mary.

She took Angeline out of the closet and brushed and re-curled her long, blond locks.

***

On Tuesday afternoon, Mary sat on her window seat and waited patiently while her odd fish of a governess finished grading the day's lessons. She watched the carriages rumble by, competing with the noisy motorcars that were chugging up the hill from the city.

She saw Mrs. Endicott's black Newfoundland drag her maid up and down the street several times.

Finally, Miss Lawson got up from the desk and warned Mary to practice her French more diligently. The governess had never had to scold Paulette.

Mary was listening to yet another admonishment when she suddenly heard a little girl's voice, sweet and low.

What was she saying?

"Young lady, are you listening to me at all?" Miss Lawson glared down at her with bony hands on bony hips. The woman wore black every day of the year, along with strange jewelry she would never explain.

Mary nodded, but then glanced out the window to see if someone was standing below.

There was no one about.

Miss Lawson gave an exasperated sigh and stalked out of the room, closing the door behind her.

There it was again. The sound was coming from the closet.

Mary got up and approached the closet door. She put her hand on the knob, and the voice spoke again, this time clearly.

"Three days in the grave, Mary. Three days in the grave."

She yanked the closet door open.

Nobody was inside. Everything was in its place, including Angeline, hidden behind an old hatbox filled with photographs.

The servants were playing a trick on her somehow, or perhaps it was simply her overactive imagination.

Mary took Angeline off the closet shelf and walked over to the vanity table. She picked up some blue ribbons and went and sat on the canopy bed with the doll in her lap.

She removed the big silk bow that was pinned in Angeline's golden curls.

"It's time we changed your dress, too," Mary said. "I put all your fancy clothes in my cedar chest."

Mary gathered up handfuls of Angeline's hair and began weaving in the blue ribbons.

Her fingers came across something soft and slimy. She pulled her hand away and stifled a

yelp.

Maggots! There were maggots in Angeline's hair.

As Mary watched, shivering with revulsion, the creatures seemed to multiply. They began falling onto her lap, onto the bed, rolling off onto the hardwood floor.

"No, no, no."

Mary jumped off the high bed and brushed the maggots off her skirts. She swiped them off the quilts onto the floor and crushed them with her shoes.

Dozens of them still squirmed in Angeline's hair. There were too many to get rid of.

She ran across the room to the cedar chest and threw it open. With a shudder, she buried Angeline among the blankets and doll clothes, and then slammed the lid shut.

***

Two days later, Mary felt brave enough to retrieve Angeline from the cedar chest. She could find no trace of the maggots. They had disappeared from the floor and the canopy bed by the time Mary had returned upstairs from supper Tuesday night.

Maybe she had fallen asleep while playing with the doll and a crazy nightmare had fooled her.

That explanation made sense.

Mary took Angeline over to the window seat and changed her dress. She put a red taffeta outfit on the doll with a matching bow.

“My, my, how fetching you look,” Mary said.

A noise in the hall brought her to her feet. She set Angeline in the corner behind the pink curtain and darted over to her desk.

Miss Lawson walked in. “You’ll be eating your supper early tonight. Cook has a wedding to go to. Make sure you finish your history lesson before then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Well, that’s better, then. I’m glad you haven’t forgotten all your manners.”

The governess left the room and Mary got to her feet. She still had time to play with Angeline.

She started to cross the room, but stopped when something tickled her neck, right underneath her front collar. She felt around and touched something long and squirmy.

It was a worm. Mary let out a strangled cry and flung it to the floor.

“Five days in the grave, Mary. Five days in the grave.”

Mary hurried across the bedroom and tore aside the curtain. Large, black spots covered Angeline’s porcelain face and her left eye was missing. Dark red worms crawled in and out of the empty socket.

A suffocating, foul odor permeated the room.

Mary took a step backwards, away from the window seat. “Stop it, Paulette. I know you’re doing this to me. If you hadn’t been so mean, you wouldn’t be dead. It’s all your fault, do you hear me? It’s all your fault!”

“Mary, what in heaven’s name are you screaming about?” Miss Lawson was standing in the doorway with a scowl on her face. “What’s the matter with you, young lady? You’re about to spoil your mother’s rest, and you know how bad her nerves have been this last week.”

“I…I’m sorry,” Mary said, swallowing hard. “I was just daydreaming, that’s all.”

Miss Lawson couldn’t see Angeline behind the curtain. She obviously didn’t smell the stench that hung in the air either.

“Some daydream it must have been – more like a nightmare. You should get back to your studies until supper. I’ll be grading your lessons soon.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Miss Lawson shook her head and closed the door behind her.

The foul odor was gradually disappearing. Mary didn’t want to look behind the curtain again. She hoped accusing Paulette would make her stop these cruel games. If not, she would have to find another way.

***

Mary went to bed late that night, leaving Angeline hidden behind the curtain on the window seat. She would have to move her to another hiding place soon, but she wasn’t brave enough to do that yet.

She snuggled under the quilts in the middle of the canopy bed and quickly fell asleep.

A noise woke her a few hours later. It was a little girl's voice again, pitiful and soft.

"It's cold and damp and dark in the grave, Mary. The worms are in my head. It hurts when they move around, eating me inside out. There's no escape, Mary. No escape."

Mary choked back a sob. "You can have Angeline back, Paulette. I'll bring her to you. Just please, stop what you're doing. I can't take it anymore."

Mary didn't hear the voice again.

Just before sunrise, she rose and put on her gray wool outfit and sturdy button-up shoes. She found a roomy wicker basket with a lid and put Angeline inside. The doll looked even worse that before. Her lips and fingers and toes had turned black.

Mary sneaked down the winding stairs and out the side entrance. She borrowed a small spade from the gardener's tool shed and headed up the street. The sun was just starting to rise, turning the sky a delicious pink.

St. Genevieve Cemetery was located on a bluff overlooking the ocean, about a mile away. Mary knew exactly how to get to the place. Sometimes she would sneak off to the cemetery to be by herself. It was lovely and peaceful there.

Remembering where her family's plots were situated was easy for her. All she had to look for was a freshly dug grave in that area.

She made it to the cemetery in less than thirty minutes, despite the steep hill that almost killed her. She went directly to the giant

eucalyptus tree near the edge of the bluff – and found Paulette's grave. They hadn't put the elaborate headstone in place yet.

Mary sank to her knees and dug a hole in the center of the grave. She placed Angeline inside, face-up – and resisted the urge to cry. Instead, she listened to the waves crashing against the rocks below the bluff.

When she'd finished shoveling the moist, black dirt in on top of the doll, she stood and brushed herself off.

"There, Paulette. I did what you wanted. Now leave me alone."

***

Mary stayed up late Saturday night working on her studies, trying to get her mind off Angeline.

It wasn't fair. Paulette always had to have her way.

She finally turned down her oil lamp a little after midnight and crawled into bed, yawning.

Selfish Paulette. Mary hoped she *could* feel pain in the grave. Mary hoped she would be cold and scared for eternity. Her cousin deserved it.

She was just about to drift off to sleep when something wet and cold plopped onto her cheek. She wiped it off with her fingers, but it was too dark to see what it was.

Mary sighed, and scooted out of bed. She walked carefully over to her desk and fished out the matchbook she had taken from the tinderbox.

Three matches remained. She lit two small candles and approached the bed.

The putrid stench had returned, and it was even worse than before. If Mary had had a free hand, she would have covered her nose and mouth.

"No," she whispered, "this can't be happening again."

There was a stain growing on the underside of the cloth canopy, and a brownish liquid was dripping onto the bed.

It was blood mixed with something else. Mary didn't want to know what.

This isn't real. I'm just having a bad dream. I'll wake up soon – I know I will.

Mary set one of the candles on the nightstand and pulled a chair over to the bed.

Trembling, she climbed up and held the other candle high.

What she saw nearly stopped her heart.

"Eight days in the grave, Mary. Eight days in the grave."

***

As soon as the burns on her arms and legs healed, Mary would be transferred from St. Elizabeth's Hospital to the Santa Clara County Insane Asylum.

They all thought she was crazy for setting her bed on fire. She'd tried to stop them from putting out the flames, but her father had overpowered her. She'd been tied up for her own good and carted off to the hospital immediately.

Mary had confessed everything on her arrival there. She had to make them understand what was happening.

But no one wanted to believe her. Poor little perfect Paulette was an angel in heaven now – and not the avenging kind.

Mary lay wrapped in bandages soaked with stinky ointment in a spacious open room on the hospital's top floor. It was a lonely place. The doors to the room were locked, and all the other female patients refused to talk to Mary.

Around noon on her fourth day at St. Elizabeth's, Miss Lawson came to see her. Her father had only visited her once so far, and he hadn't had much to say.

One of the nurses let the governess in and locked the door behind her.

Miss Lawson smiled as she approached Mary's bed. She was holding a big yellow shopping bag. "I hear you're doing a little better now. You're lucky your father pulled you away from the fire when he did. Your injuries could have been much worse. And you'll be glad to know that they're already fixing your room back the way it was – not too much damage after all."

Mary sighed. "It doesn't matter. I won't be going home again for a long time. The doctor said so."

Miss Lawson cleared her throat. "Well, one never knows what might happen in these cases."

The governess moved a chair close to the bed and sat down. She lifted the shopping bag onto

her lap. “Mrs. Stanford wanted me to bring you a few things to help pass the time.”

Miss Lawson began pulling out books – hefty, boring ones. A few magazines were in the bag, too, along with a tiny box of chocolates.

“And here, I’ve saved the best thing for last – something to keep you company,” the governess said.

Mary shrank back against the pillows in horror as Miss Lawson pulled Angeline out of the bag.

The doll looked hideously real. Blackened strips of skin hung off her hands and feet. Her blue-gray dress was soaked with a foul liquid, and her head was almost ready to fall off. Worms and maggots crawled in and out of her eyes and neck and mouth.

“Get it away!” Mary screamed. “Get it away from me!”

Miss Lawson clucked her tongue and shook her head. “Now, Mary, I thought you understood. There’s no escape from the grave.”

Mary jumped out of bed and ran as the doll’s shrill, childish laughter followed her.

There was only one way to escape the nightmare. Mary understood what she needed to do.

She bolted across the room and threw herself against one of the tall, wide windows. It shattered easily, but Mary didn’t feel any pain. She found herself flying through the air like a bird, weightless and free. In those final moments before darkness claimed her, she felt truly special.

She felt beautiful at last.

Flower Girl

“That god-awful stench is the first thing you’ll notice – right before you see her,” Lila said, shuddering.

Eli Rosenberg crossed his legs and stared at the plantation house secretary. In all his sixty-three years, he’d never laid eyes on a ghost, never heard anything go bump in the night, and he never expected to either. But he didn’t want to offend the pretty, young blond.

“Well, don’t worry, if I smell something evil, I won’t wait around to see what’s coming. I’ll run like the devil himself is after me.”

“That won’t do you any good. Everybody who’s seen the flower girl has ended up having an accident or a streak of bad luck. The last gardener that worked here was nearly killed in a car wreck the next morning. And me? I fell down the grand staircase afterwards and broke my arm. The only reason I still work here is because I’m a single mother with no degree.”

Eli raised a bushy eyebrow. “So, you’re saying I’d be better off finding a summer job elsewhere?”

Lila leaned forward over her cluttered desk.

“That’s up to you. I just felt it was my Christian duty to let you know why we have such a high employee turnover.”

***

Eli had to admit the plantation looked haunted. Even though the new owners had restored the white-columned antebellum mansion to its original splendor, the surrounding atmosphere felt heavy with tragic secrets just waiting to be discovered.

This gloominess was due in part to the ancient live oaks that stood sentinel nearby, draped in Spanish moss, forever casting their eerie shadows over the house and grounds.

“Have you seen the little flower girl yet?” Eli asked.

His teenage assistant was helping him trim the hedges on the south side of Bainbridge Hall, and Eli was really just trying to make conversation.

Tracy shook his curly red head. “I haven’t worked here long, but I think the story is true. Happened a long time ago, but most people around here know all about the Melissa Tolliver murder. They found her body over in the pine grove by the lake.” He finished off his bottle of spring water with one sloppy gulp. “Anyway, Lila and the others, they ain’t a bunch of crackpots. If they say the place is haunted, I’d believe it.”

Overactive imaginations can lead to mass hallucinations, Eli thought. Aloud he said, “Guess you’re right. At least it makes this job a little more interesting, eh?”

“You don’t believe in her, do you?”

Eli removed his silver-rimmed glasses and wiped the sweat off his craggy face. He was an upstate New Yorker, originally, and these humid South Carolina summers never failed to kick his Yankee butt.

"Even if I saw her, son, I'd still have a hard time believing."

Tracy grinned. "From what I hear, she can be pretty dang convincing."

***

Four days later, on his way into work, Eli stopped at a toy store right outside Charleston to buy his granddaughter a birthday present. His late wife, Maddie, had been an unrepentant shopaholic. She'd had a knack for choosing the perfect gift, no matter what the occasion.

And that was only one of the thousand and one reasons he missed her so much.

Eli wandered aimlessly around the deserted superstore, overwhelmed by the sheer number of toys, games and gadgets on display. They were piled waist-high in colorful rubber bins, and stacked on shelves that rose all the way up to the fifteen-foot ceiling. He finally picked out a doll that seemed to do everything a real baby could do: eat, pee, cry, kick, wave its arms. While he was there, he couldn't resist getting his grandson a battery-operated locomotive that whistled and blew smoke out of its short, black stack.

Eli came thundering up the plantation's long driveway in his pickup about five minutes after nine. Not bad, considering the traffic he'd had to fight. Nobody could accuse him of driving like an old geezer.

With the sun already scorching the top of his bare head, he headed over to the green and white outbuildings that were lined up at a good distance behind the Hall. Fridays were for mowing, an all day project that had to be completed before the weekend.

Outdoor weddings were popular in June.

Right before Eli reached the shed that housed the Bush Hog mowers, the doors flew open and Tracy came barreling towards him. The kid's green eyes were bulged out like a toad's.

"I just seen her! She's behind the shed!"

"Whoa, settle down." Eli grabbed the boy's scrawny shoulders and forced him to stand still.

"I thought there was a dead cat in there. Then I felt something staring at me and it was *her*! She was watching me through the cracks in the back wall."

"Stay here. I'll go check it out."

"No! It's too late for me, but you're still safe. You ain't seen her."

Eli chuckled. "Take it easy, son. Nothing bad is going to happen to either one of us."

Tracy crossed himself feverishly, making Eli chuckle even harder. The kid was probably a Baptist.

Eli approached the shed and immediately caught a whiff of something foul. It smelled like a dead animal that had been baking under a hot sun for a couple of days.

On the left side of the outbuilding, in the tall grass, Eli spotted a trail of dried, pink flowers. He followed them around to the back of the shed and stopped short.

A little blond-haired girl in a blue chiffon dress stood with her back to him, holding a white straw basket. She dropped a handful of dead, crumbly rose petals on the ground and began to sing.

"Dum dum da dum, dum dum da dum."

Eli smiled. She had to belong to the tour group up at the mansion. They must've thought it would be mighty funny to scare off the help. The grownups were probably out there snickering behind the oak trees with their complicated camcorders. He wondered where they'd gotten the dead cat.

"Okay, sweetheart. Turn around. The game's up."

The little girl just stood there, giggling.

He took a step in her direction, and she looked back over her shoulder at him with sunken, shriveled eyes.

Eli's jaw dropped, and he let it hang there, convinced his frantic heart would soon jump out of his mouth. Her face - what was left of it - was too horrible to comprehend. Greenish-black flesh hung off the skull in oozing, maggoty strips.

The putrid scent of decay washed over him, and he gagged. The flower girl smiled ghoulishly. She didn't have any lips, just a row of perfect white baby teeth.

"Eli! You all right?"

Melissa Tolliver's ghost turned and skipped away from him, disappearing around the corner of the shed.

Eli hadn't realized a person could taste fear. His had a cold, metallic flavor.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and chased after her, rounding the corner and colliding hard with Tracy.

"What happened? Did you see her?" The teenager was so pale, the spray of freckles across his nose looked like an outbreak of measles.

"Did *you* see her, just now?" Eli adjusted his glasses.

"No, and I hope to God I never do again."

***

At noon, Eli carried his boxed lunch over to the south terrace and joined Lila at one of the wrought-iron tables. He didn't have much of an appetite.

"I think you were lucky." Lila stirred sweetener into a tall glass of iced tea. "She wasn't singing songs and throwing flowers when I ran into her - she was floating down the upstairs hall with a belt wrapped around her neck." She

paused briefly. "I guess that's what the poor thing was strangled with."

Eli reluctantly took a bite out of his tuna salad sandwich.

"What happened to the killer?" he mumbled.

"It was a teenager named Danny Brisco. He hanged himself in his jail cell the night before the sentencing."

Eli couldn’t help but wonder if the guy had had some otherworldly “help.”

It was funny. A few hours ago, his skeptical brain wouldn’t have been capable of producing such a thought. Seeing was believing – whether he liked it or not.

He took a swig from his lukewarm can of Coke, just as the quiet afternoon was shattered by a woman’s scream. The sound had come from inside the mansion.

He and Lila exchanged a knowing look before rushing the French doors.

All the commotion was at the front of the Hall, where Tracy lay unconscious on the floor, just inside the foyer. The kid’s red, splotchy face was swelled so badly that his eyes were almost invisible.

Violet – a heavyset black woman who worked as a tour guide – was kneeling beside the boy with her crimson hoop skirts spread across him. Her tear-streaked face wore a helpless expression.

“He got stung by a bee! He can’t breathe!”

“Has anybody called 911?” Lila asked, her voice calm.

“Kathleen’s in the office, calling them right now.” Violet shook her head slowly. “But I don’t think this poor child’s going to make it.”

***

Eli dragged himself out of bed on Saturday and hopped in the shower. His granddaughter’s birthday party was later that morning, and he hadn’t even wrapped her gift yet.

It was a hell of a bad time for a celebration anyway: Tracy was gone. Help had arrived too late to save him.

As soon as the ambulance had pulled away with the body, Violet had quit her job and fled. She hadn’t even bothered to change out of her costume.

After the tour guide’s stormy defection, a tearful Lila had looked over at Eli and said, “I’m surprised you aren’t in the next county by now.”

He had shrugged. “This could just be a terrible coincidence. If not, it won’t do me any good to run, remember?”

But you can bet I’ll be looking over my shoulder for the rest of my golden years.

Eli cautiously stepped out of the shower and dried off. It took him less than five minutes to get dressed and more than thirty to wrap his grandbaby’s present. He’d done a piss-poor job, but at least all the doll parts were covered. The heavy locomotive would have to wait.

***

Eli's tiny apartment in the Historic District of Charleston was three blocks away from Greg and Cheryl's brick townhouse. His daughter had offered to pick him up, but he couldn't see the point in either of them driving.

The heatwave they'd been having had subsided. The walk would do him good – not that there was anything wrong with the old ticker.

Eli ambled up Columbus Street towards the ocean. The sidewalks were teeming with tourists and street entertainers. Traffic was zooming by, providing a slight breeze. In the air, exhaust fumes mixed with the scent of deep-fried seafood.

The aroma actually made his mouth water – he hadn't made time for breakfast.

Eli neared Hanover Street, where the townhouse stood on the corner. The grandkids, Austin and Amber, would be jumping up and down on the second floor balcony, trying to catch a glimpse of his tall, thin figure.

He was less than half a block away from the intersection at Columbus and Hanover when he came across a section of sidewalk that had one of those wide metal trapdoors stretched across it. He had never trusted those things to hold up his weight. Under the circumstances, he certainly wasn't going to trust one now.

The other side of the walkway was blocked by a herd of noisy teenagers waiting at a bus stop. They stood around texting or gabbing on smartphones and sipping Starbucks coffee.

Instead of plowing his way through the indifferent crowd, Eli decided to walk around a

parked SUV. The vehicle in question was vibrating to the sound of a raunchy rap tune – motivating him to get by it in a hurry.

He stepped past the SUV onto the street.

"OLD MAN, LOOK OUT!"

He glanced to his left. A boy on a ten-speed was hurtling towards him.

THUNK!

Eli fell back against the SUV as Amber's foil-wrapped doll became a missile. He watched it land in the middle of the street.

The boy on the bicycle sped on without looking back.

Eli figured the doll was living on borrowed time. He could empathize, but what was he going to do about it? Traffic was still whizzing by.

He watched a Buick swerve to avoid the shiny, odd-shaped package.

Across the street, a middle-aged homeless man appeared to be assessing the situation. He made eye contact with Eli and lifted his shoulders, giving him a palms-up gesture.

But a few seconds later, a smile spread across the man's bearded face. He looked over at Eli and pointed up the street.

A horse-drawn carriage had just turned onto Columbus and was making its way towards them, slowing the eastbound traffic to a crawl.

It was worth a try. The Miraculous Mindy Doll was still in one piece.

Eli waited until the carriage was about three car-lengths away and then darted out into the street, snatching up the present. Just as he

turned to sprint back, he heard an engine revving.

He looked over and saw a red Corvette passing the carriage, charging at him like an angry bull. The driver laid on his horn.

Eli jumped forward, his right foot landing in a small pothole. A sharp pain shot through his ankle and he went sprawling. The doll skidded across the pavement towards the carriage as the Corvette roared past.

The startled horse kicked the present back out into the street.

Eli retrieved his glasses and found himself nose to nose with the smelly old nag. The lady driver had stopped the carriage.

He turned his head in time to see a dune buggy's low-slung fender clip the doll, sending it flying in the opposite direction.

The homeless man saw it coming and zeroed in on it like a running back intercepting a pass. He sprang into the air and caught the ripped package neatly under his arm.

Eli grinned in relief.

The man promptly lifted the doll over his head and did a victory dance up and down the sidewalk.

***

Eli went back to work a week later. Everyone was surprised to see him.

They thought he'd gotten off pretty light with just a sprained ankle and a smattering of

bruises. Even “Mindy’s” injuries were repairable.

Eli wasn’t about to give up his job so easily. (Being a Wal-Mart greeter wasn’t for him.) He needed the money to supplement his teacher’s retirement, but that wasn’t the only reason he hadn’t quit. His stubbornness had asserted itself: He wasn’t going to let a little girl’s ghost get the better of him. If Lila could stick it out, so could he.

Besides, maybe the specter was finished with him. Perhaps she only appeared to people once, which would mean he was immune to any more bad luck.

This theory eased his fears over the next two weeks.

On the last Saturday in June – a brutally hot morning – Eli drove into work to perform a few last-minute chores that needed to be done before the outdoor wedding ceremonies could begin that day. He still didn’t have a new assistant, hence the overtime.

His first task was wheeling a cartload of fresh flowers out to the gazebo by the lake. They’d probably be wilted by noon, but that wasn’t his problem. He placed some of the potted petunias by the steps of the gazebo and arranged the rest along the low walls. Then he fetched a broom off the wooden cart and began sweeping the painted floor.

Even in the shade, beads of sweat formed on his brow and dripped into his eyes. The back of his work shirt was soon soaked.

Eli pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at his face and neck, thinking that a frosty glass of lemonade would hit the spot. He was about to stuff the handkerchief back in his pocket when he felt a little tug on his shirttail.

"Mister, do you like my new dress?" The vengeful ghost had a small, sweet voice.

God Almighty.

If the wind had been blowing in the other direction, he would have smelled her first.

Eli let go of the broom and turned around.

He knew better than to run. Maybe he should talk to it. Maybe that would make it happy and it would go away.

Eli blocked out the flower girl's hideous face and focused on her powder-blue outfit instead. It was trimmed with embroidered white daisies, and had a wide silk sash. She was wearing frilly socks and white patent shoes. Her long, blond hair was tied back with blue and white ribbons.

He cleared his throat. "My now, aren't you a pretty little thing."

The flower girl giggled.

Eli kept staring at her shoes. The straps were decorated with heart-shaped cutouts. His granddaughter had a pair of shoes like that. Amber was five years old now.

"Can you help me find the lost puppy?" Melissa Tolliver asked, swinging her basket high and low. "He's in the woods over there." She pointed across the small lake to a grove of pine trees swaying in the breeze. "If I find him, I get to keep him."

Eli felt a lump form in his throat. *So that's how the son of a bitch lured her away.*

"The puppy isn't in the woods anymore, sweetheart. He's gone home. Maybe you should go home, too."

"It's a long way off," she said, sighing. "Mommy and Daddy went home and left me here. Why did they do that, mister? Was I bad?"

Eli's gaze moved up to the flower girl's face. It looked almost normal.

"No, I don't think you were bad. You just got lost, like the puppy, that's all. I'm sure your parents miss you very much."

A feeling of profound sadness swept over Eli. He thought about his grandbabies. What if something this horrific ever happened to one of them? The world was full of monsters just like Brisco.

How could a person even go on after their child was murdered this way – forever imagining the fear and pain they'd suffered before the end? How did the Tollivers do it? Did they both go mad?

Eli could barely see for the tears. He took off his glasses and sank to the floor of the gazebo.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered. "So sorry this happened to you."

"Shhh!" The flower girl danced up and down the steps in front of him. "Don't be sad. It's okay now. See?"

She appeared by his left shoulder and sprinkled him with handfuls of soft, pink rose

petals. Eli had never smelled anything sweeter.

The flower girl's face was beautiful now. She smiled at him, showing off a set of perfectly matched dimples. Her blue eyes were large and round and innocent.

"I've got to go now, mister. Bye!"

She hopped down the steps and ran across the emerald lawn, stopping at the edge of the shimmering lake. She seemed to be waiting for something to happen.

Eli wiped his eyes and put his glasses back on. The flower girl was glowing.

He stood and looked in the direction of her gaze. A brilliant ball of white light appeared on the other side of the lake. It floated quickly across the water towards the little girl, who waved at it happily.

The sparkling orb expanded and surrounded her, somehow becoming even brighter.

Eli heard what sounded like a whole playground filled with children: peals of laughter and excited little voices – all the carefree sounds of childhood.

He descended the gazebo steps and walked out into the yard.

The light vanished, taking the flower girl home.

What Happened in the Cellar

"This place creeps me out." Shelby tossed her overnight bag into the front passenger seat of her green VW Beetle. "Maybe you should borrow one of Avery's watchdogs, at least until Mom and Dad get back from Florida."

Lacey threw her younger sister an amused look. "It's just an old house surrounded by some spooky looking trees. I feel perfectly safe here."

They were standing in the gravel driveway by the carport. Shelby looked around, squinting in the mid-October sunshine. "I can't believe Granny didn't sell this place after Grandpa died. Now we have to worry about getting rid of it."

"I hope it doesn't sell right away. That'll give me more time to decide if moving back here is the right thing to do."

Shelby crossed her arms and smiled. "You started to relax as soon as you got here yesterday, and today you seem more like your old self. I don't think you'll miss Detroit. You're still a country girl at heart." Her expression became serious. "Besides, if I were you, I'd want

to get as far away from Wayne Forman as I possibly could."

Lacey felt a chill run down her spine.

"He'd probably still be in prison if I'd had the guts to show up at his parole hearing," she said, sighing.

"Maybe, maybe not. Men who beat their wives manage to get off way too easy most of the time. Wayne should've gotten life for what he did to you."

Lacey's throat tightened and she suddenly found it difficult to breathe. This happened to her every time she thought about the events that took place on that awful night five years earlier. The night her husband had put her in the hospital – and she had lost their unborn baby boy.

"Lord, I'm sorry, Lace. I didn't mean to upset you." Shelby moved forward and put an arm around her sister's shoulders. "You need to sit down?"

Lacey shook her head. "I'll be okay." She pushed back a lock of her honey-blond hair, and met Shelby's troubled blue gaze. "Really, I feel better now. You should get on the road, Miss Thacker. I don't want you traveling after dark."

***

Later that evening, Lacey walked out onto the front deck of her parents' log house with Thomasina, her mother's silver tabby, hot on her heels. She had just fed the lonely cat, and it was purring at fifty decibels. Lacey rested her

arms on the railing and took in the glorious view, while Thomasina rubbed against her legs.

The temperature was still pleasant; she felt comfortable in her jeans and flannel shirt.

It was the best time of year to visit Misty Hollow. The shimmering scarlet hills looked like they'd been set ablaze, and the crisp autumn breeze smelled of apples, dry leaves, and wood smoke.

From this lofty vantage point, she could see Grandma Millie's white Gothic-style farmhouse across the way, and her garden to the south, filled with bright orange pumpkins. A creek snaked its way down the center of the valley, along with a paved road that followed the course of its eastern bank. Farther south around the bend was Avery Bishop's little place. Lacey could see smoke spiraling into the air from the old man's woodstove.

Just to the north, on the other side of the creek, was a small Pentecostal church. The Sunday evening service was in full swing, and the faint sound of the worshipers' heartfelt singing reached Lacey's ears.

It was all so familiar – and comforting. Eleven years had passed since she had moved away from Misty Hollow to attend college in the "big city." She had meant to come back to Kentucky after graduation. Her parents – both teachers – had longed for her to follow in their footsteps.

Lacey would have done so if she hadn't met Wayne. He was a star football player, and the

handsomest guy she'd ever seen. Her perfect blond prince had made her feel like a princess.

Their wish for a fairy tale wedding came true right after graduation. But it hadn't taken long for the honeymoon to end.

***

Shelby phoned around 9:00 that night to let her sister know she had made it safely back to Cincinnati. As soon as the call ended, Lacey took a hot, scented bubble bath.

She stayed submerged in the claw-footed tub until her skin began to prune. When she got out, she smoothed on some lotion and slipped her pink cotton nightshirt over her head. Then she padded across the hall into her grandparents' bedroom and climbed into their sturdy four-poster.

Lacey curled up in the center of the high bed, under a pile of handmade quilts, and listened to the eerie music being made by the wind-whipped trees that stood all around the one-story home. Every once in a while an acorn would fall from the giant oak right outside her window, and she would hear it land on the slate roof.

The frame structure did a lot of creaking and groaning even when it wasn't windy. Lacey was used to the strange noises, but it still took her over an hour to fall asleep.

She was dreaming about her grandmother when it happened.

A woman's piercing scream suddenly ripped through the night, nearly stopping Lacey's heart.

She sat bolt upright in bed, trembling in the pitch darkness.

The sound of running footsteps reached her next. She slid over and switched on the dim reading lamp that sat next to the Big Ben alarm clock. It was 1:44 A.M.

Time to face the nightmare. She knew she couldn't open any of the bedroom windows. They were old and warped. The only phone in the house – besides her useless cell phone – was sitting on the kitchen counter, along with her purse and car keys.

And Grandma Millie had hated guns.

Sweet Lord. Someone was ransacking the place. Furniture was being overturned and lamps were being smashed. What was she going to do? Her heart was pounding so fast and hard she was afraid it might burst.

Think, Lacey. You've got to get away.

She jumped out of bed and grabbed a hefty vase off the dresser. Should she hide behind the bedroom door and wait, or confront the intruder head on? Taking a deep, shaky breath, she stepped into the hall and flipped on the light.

The noise stopped, and Lacey noticed that the wind had died. The silence was just as frightening.

She waited for a long minute and then tiptoed barefoot down the hall. The light above her began to flicker as she stepped off the chilly hardwood floor onto the area rug in the living room.

She switched on a lamp. Everything looked normal.

The kitchen was on her right. She lifted her makeshift weapon a little higher and entered the room cautiously.

Not a thing out of place. Incredible.

Lacey found the light switch and hurriedly crossed the cold tile floor to the back entrance.

The door was still locked.

Her shoulders slumped in relief. She set the vase on the edge of the gray Formica counter.

Better check the front door, just to be safe.

She was halfway across the kitchen when the overhead light went out. Lacey sucked in her breath and froze, every muscle tensed. Her eyes were immediately drawn to the cellar door on her left. A faint glow came from the gap at the bottom.

She wanted to run, but something wouldn't let her. A force stronger than her fear was drawing her to the cellar. She couldn't tear her eyes away from the door.

As she watched, it slowly swung open on its creaky hinges, releasing the icy, damp air that had been trapped below. The glowing light bulb that hung from the stairwell's ceiling swung back and forth, casting wild shadows across the room.

Lacey felt her knees turn to mush. She stumbled towards the kitchen table and gripped the back of a chair for support. Her head was spinning.

"I can't go down there. I'm not ready."

She couldn't believe she had said the words out loud – and to whom?

There was no real intruder here. No living person, anyway. She was sure of that.

Lacey pulled out the high-backed chair she had been holding on to and sank into it. The light bulb in the stairwell gradually stopped swinging and the kitchen began to feel warmer as she sat there thinking, trying to make sense of it all.

But she couldn't. Not yet.

The overhead light flickered back on.

Lacey got up before her courage could fail her and quickly closed the cellar door.

She'd left the light bulb burning.

***

Lacey slept late the next morning. When she awoke, she wanted to believe that the frightening events of the night before had simply been a bad dream, or a product of her imagination. But she knew better.

After making the bed, she put on a pair of soft jeans and a red plaid shirt, slipped on her leather moccasins, and made her way down the hall to the kitchen.

Feeling brave in the light of day, she marched straight over to the cellar door and yanked it open. The light bulb was still glowing. No rush of arctic air, though. She looked down the uneven wooden stairs and saw a bushel basket of chestnuts sitting at the bottom. Some were still encased in their spiny burs – now brown instead of green – and a few had fallen onto the cement floor.

Lacey gave herself a mental pep talk as she eased down the stairs. A dank, musty smell soon reached her nostrils. When she got to the bottom step, she flipped on another, brighter light and looked around. Besides the furnace and the new hot water heater, all she saw were shelves filled with canned goods, worktables, an old wringer washing machine, and the stand-alone shower her grandfather had used each day after coming home from the mines.

There was nothing scary about any of that.

She gingerly picked up the wicked looking burs one at a time and laid them back in the basket. She would have to get rid of them all later.

Once upstairs, Lacey wrestled a short stepladder out of the pantry and, for her own peace of mind, set about replacing most of the light bulbs in the house. When she was finished, she decided to have breakfast on the covered back porch.

It was mild and sunny, another perfect fall day. Squirrels were playing tag in the spacious backyard, and all the birds sang cheerfully, as though they were competing to see who had the loudest, sweetest song.

Lacey took a bowl of bran cereal and a mug of strong, black coffee out to the cedar table and sat facing the south garden. But she didn't have much of an appetite. She couldn't stop thinking about the previous night – and her serious brush with the supernatural.

She knew very little about the history of her grandparents' house, other than the fact that they

had bought the place sixty-eight years ago, right after they were married. Her Grandpa Sim had gradually updated the home. After a long battle with black lung, he had passed away in the hospital when Lacey was fourteen.

This past July, Grandma Millie had died of heart failure right there on the carport. Lacey's father had found her lying next to the back steps with a broom still in her hand and a peaceful expression on her face.

Surely both her grandparents were at rest now.

Lacey didn't understand the significance of the sights and sounds she had experienced. Perhaps they had something to do with the original owners, whoever they were. She found it odd that her grandparents had never mentioned any strange goings-on in the house while they were alive.

The elderly couple had told Lacey and Shelby many a ghost story, which they swore were true. Maybe they had kept quiet about their own haunting so she and her sister would not be afraid to spend the night.

Lacey leaned back in her wooden chair, coffee mug in hand, and let a wide grin spread across her face. Shelby had always been easily spooked, and when they were kids, Lacey had been her gleeful tormentor. Their grandparents' property had been the perfect place for Halloween pranks.

Her smile faded. She wished that last night's hair-raising incident had only been the result of Shelby's long-awaited revenge.

***

Lacey dreaded nightfall, but at the same time, her curiosity had been piqued. She wondered if the phenomena she had witnessed would be repeated – if there were a reason, a higher purpose, for her involvement. She was afraid to tell her family, or Avery, about the experience. They would probably just think she was having a nervous breakdown.

To get her mind off of her unusual situation, she tuned the static-prone old radio in the living room to a country music station and kept herself busy with cleaning chores. She polished the oak fireplace first, and then went on a dusting rampage.

The three-bedroom home was filled with an eclectic assortment of furniture, dating from the 1930s on up to the 1980s. Even though the interior had a certain amount of charm, Lacey knew she would have to be ruthless if she ever moved into the house permanently.

She vacuumed all the rugs next, and then mopped the kitchen floor. When suppertime rolled around, she was still trying to tidy up the built-in bookcase in the living room. Figurines, framed photos, old books, and an assortment of bibles, were all vying for space among the shelves.

Lacey decided to take a break after discovering several photo albums that were stuck together on the bottom shelf. She slapped together a ham and cheese sandwich, grabbed a Coke out of the fridge, and settled down in an

overstuffed armchair in the living room. She leafed through the photo albums as she ate.

The naked baby pictures of her dad made her giggle – and she was amazed at how beautiful her grandmother had once been. She found romantic photos of her parents' wedding day, and tons of nauseatingly sweet snapshots that were taken when she and her sister were little. People still told them that they looked like twins.

Lacey's mood darkened when she came across a lone photo that had been taken on her own wedding day. The young June bride, dressed in white satin and pearls, looked up at her with trusting blue eyes filled with hope and joy.

Lacey smiled bitterly. "Sometimes what you don't know *can* hurt you," she whispered.

***

A woman's bloodcurdling scream shattered the stillness of the night.

Lacey instantly jerked awake in the armchair, letting a lapful of photo albums slide off into the floor. Moonlight poured through the big picture window behind her, illuminating the room so well that her eyes barely needed time to adjust.

She glanced at the clock on the fireplace mantle as the sound of running footsteps reached her ears. It was 1:44 A.M. – again.

Lacey broke out in a cold sweat, her heart racing. The footsteps were so close.

It can't hurt you. Just be calm. There's no need to run.

She was afraid to move, and she didn't think she could stand if her life depended on it.

Lacey gasped as heavy objects began crashing to the floor around her. She could feel the vibration of each violent impact – but she couldn't see it happening. The room looked peaceful and ordinary.

The disturbance moved into the kitchen. Someone was running, chairs were being knocked over and glass was breaking. Then Lacey heard the unmistakable sound of a body tumbling down the cellar stairs.

This brought her to her feet. She had to investigate whether she liked it or not. She had to find out what had happened in this house. It was the only way to stop the haunting.

She hesitated for one nerve-wracking moment, and then sprinted into the kitchen.

The cellar door was wide-open, the light bulb glowing softly. The silence that had fallen over the place was deafening.

Lacey backed up to the wall and flipped on the overhead light. It flickered and went out.

She began reciting the Lord's Prayer under her breath as she inched towards the cellar stairs. Crossing the kitchen seemed to take an eternity.

She paused at the top of the steps, and put a hand on the doorframe to steady herself.

There wasn't a body lying at the foot of the stairs – of course not. But the basket of chestnuts had been overturned.

Lacey shivered in the chilly air. She was supposed to go down there, wasn't she?

She grabbed hold of the handrail and made her way slowly down the crooked steps.

She was close to the bottom when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. She turned her head to the left and glanced around the cellar.

There it was – in the center of the basement – a pinpoint of light that was growing larger and brighter with each passing second.

Lacey hugged herself for comfort. Why wasn't she bolting up the stairs?

The ball of scintillating light moved closer, and Lacey sensed she had nothing to fear. The light was warm, and it radiated love – unconditional, protective and never-ending.

"Granny?" Lacey blinked away her tears and descended the stairs, stepping around the fallen basket of chestnuts.

The bright light, which had shifted into an elongated, wavering shape, was floating away from her towards the north side of the cellar. She followed it, intrigued and unafraid.

It paused in front of the north wall, and Lacey got closer. The sparkling light was so beautiful. She reached out to touch it, but it moved right through a row of shelves and disappeared into the cinderblock wall.

The basement suddenly felt chilly again. Lacey stood bewildered in the semi-darkness, wondering what was behind the wall. Was there a door hidden

somewhere? She would have to move the row of shelves, heavy with canned goods, to find out.

"But not now. In the morning, first thing, I promise."

Lacey felt physically and emotionally drained. Her heart longed to believe that the mysterious light she had seen had been the spirit of her sweet, harmless grandmother.

But even if it wasn't true, one thing was certain: There was an entity occupying the house, and it was trying to tell her something.

***

The mist hung low and heavy on the hills, bringing a damp chill to the early morning air. Lacey retrieved a flashlight from the glove compartment of her car and hurried back into the house.

She was eager to send the earthbound spirit on its peaceful way. The key to doing so had to be in the cellar.

After righting the bushel basket and gathering up the chestnuts, Lacey began removing all the canned goods from the shelving that stood against the north wall. The mason jars were filled with every type of fruit and vegetable in existence. She loaded the goods into some boxes she had found under the stairwell and then stacked them on the worktables that were lined up on the west side of the basement.

The wooden shelving had no backboard. Lacey carefully moved the rickety pieces forward so she

could view the cinderblock wall.

She didn't see a door, but there was something else – another opening, with a gray metal cover. She walked to the other end and moved the shelving out farther so she could reach it. The opening looked to be about two feet high and two feet wide.

There was a handle on the right. Lacey pulled it down and the little door swung open with a hideous screech.

Her heart began to beat a little faster.

She switched on her flashlight and aimed it inside. The rays picked out pieces of glistening coal that were scattered all about. A wooden-handled shovel lay just past the opening on the raised cinderblock floor.

A coal bin. The old furnace must have been taken out over thirty years before.

Lacey took a deep breath and leaned inside the doorway, letting the beam of her flashlight roam around the interior. An adult could stand up inside, easy. There was another opening at the top of the back wall, in the center, that had a short wooden chute attached. It was where the coal was shoveled in – where the carport was now. She saw little piles of the black stuff here and there, and a lot of dust. The bin was virtually empty.

So, what were you expecting – a human skeleton crumpled in a corner, with irons and chains hanging out of the wall around it?

She sneezed.

This mystery wasn’t going to be so easy to solve.

***

Lacey waxed her white Taurus until it reflected the cool sunlight like a mirror. Then she tackled the inside of the car. Her thoughts were on the past, and the paranormal puzzle she was trying to piece together.

Obviously, something bad had happened to someone in her grandparents’ house – in the cellar, and perhaps the coal bin. But why hadn’t she heard about it, especially if her grandmother had been involved?

Maybe it wasn’t Granny’s spirit that had appeared.

But it had felt like her. Why couldn’t a ghost just speak its mind instead of beating around the bush?

Lacey was bent over, fishing out the loose change that had collected at the bottom of the cup-holder, when she heard tires crunching gravel.

She raised her head and saw Avery’s battered red pickup lumbering up the driveway. The widower’s two large mutts were sitting in the bed of the truck with their tongues lolling out, and goofy grins on their reddish-brown faces. They yelped a greeting as Avery pulled up alongside her car and killed the truck’s noisy engine.

He rolled down his window, and Lacey noticed that he was wearing his usual attire: a pair of bibbed overalls and a denim work shirt.

“Little girl, you ain’t changed a bit. Looks like I still need to fatten you up some.”

Lacey got out of her car, grinning. “Don’t tell me you finally found Sarah’s recipe for burgoo?”

He grinned back at her, showing off a set of perfect false teeth. “Smells good, don’t it? I brought you a whole kettle full. You can have it for supper tonight.”

He tapped the window behind him and his whining dogs shot out over the tailgate. They ignored Lacey and began investigating the property with their noses glued to the ground.

Avery opened his door and handed her the quart-sized metal pot, which had a heavy lid and a swinging handle.

“This is sweet of you, but you shouldn’t have gone to all that trouble.” Lacey gave his tall, thin frame a quick hug.

He turned red under his whiskers, his dark eyes smiling. “Well, I feel I should’ve done more for Millie after Sim passed on. I can’t tell you how many apple pies that woman made for me over the years.”

“Feeding people was a hobby for her. And she was crazy about you.”

He shook his head. “I miss her, and I know y’all do too. When will Fred and Fiona get home?”

“Next week – unless Mom talks Dad into staying away longer.”

“Well, just holler if you need me.” The old man whistled shrilly. “Gus, Rusty, get on up here!”

The dogs immediately came loping back and jumped into the bed of the truck, dripping wet from their frolic in the creek. Lacey backed up in a hurry as they vigorously shook off the excess water.

Avery shut his door and turned the key in the ignition, eyeing the ominous-looking clouds that had suddenly obscured the sun.

"Looks like a storm's rollin' in after all," he said, raising his voice over the clanking of the engine. "You be careful – and tell that little sister of yours to come see me next time she's around."

***

Thunder shook the house, making the windowpanes rattle. The lightning was intense.

To Lacey, it sounded as if a battle for good and evil were being waged in the heavens. She hoped the good side won and there were no human casualties.

The power went off around ten o'clock that night and it still had not been restored when she went to bed at midnight. She curled up under the patchwork quilts, listening to the wind howl and the rain pound against the roof, thinking she wouldn't be able to fall asleep. But she was wrong.

Eventually, she began to dream.

It was morning. Sunlight poured through the window, and the aroma of fruit pies baking in the oven wafted into her room, coaxing her out of

bed. She followed the tantalizing smell to the kitchen. No one else was in the house, but she heard a noise outside, a rhythmic swishing sound.

She went out the back door and around to the carport.

An elderly woman stood there with her back to Lacey, sweeping off the concrete. She was wearing a light blue housedress and matching slippers. Her snow-white braids were arranged in a neat bun.

Lacey couldn't see her face, but she knew it was her grandmother.

"Granny?" She moved up behind the woman and gently touched her shoulder. "Granny, I thought you were gone."

Grandma Millie turned and looked at her with sad blue eyes. Her kind, wrinkled face wore a solemn expression.

"He's coming, child," she said. "He's here now."

The dream woke Lacey just before the glass shattered. The sound came from the back of the house, and this time she knew she was in real danger.

She tried to turn on the reading lamp, but it wouldn't work. The power was still out.

Lightning illuminated the bedroom. It was 1:44 A.M.

Her mouth went so dry she was afraid she was going to choke.

Lacey tumbled out of bed, shaking uncontrollably. She stepped clumsily into her

moccasins and felt around on the dresser for her small flashlight. The vase was still sitting on the kitchen counter.

Her frantic fingers brushed against the flashlight, setting it into motion. She heard it land on the hardwood floor and roll away.

Stop wasting time. It's now or never.

Lacey crept out of the bedroom and peered down the hall. She couldn't see or hear anyone.

She decided to make a run for it and escape through the front door. Her legs felt numb, but she held her breath and forced herself to move forward, gaining speed as she entered the living room.

The man appeared in front of her with the ease of an apparition. He blocked her escape as lightning lit up the night, revealing his distorted features and the long, gleaming knife he held in his hand.

Lacey stared up at him in horror and disbelief. And then she screamed – screamed like a trapped, tortured animal that knows it's going to die, and knows it won't be soon enough.

Wayne lunged at her, knocking over an end table and smashing a lamp.

Lacey fled into the dark kitchen, heading for the back door. She tripped over the leg of a chair and went sprawling.

No, please, help me, Jesus. Please don't let this happen.

Wayne hauled her up by the hair and laid the butcher knife against her throat. He reeked of cigarette smoke and hard liquor.

She let out a whimper, too terrified to cry.

"You stupid little bitch," he said. "Did you really think you could get away from me – that I'd just forgive and forget? These last few years have been a living hell, thanks to you."

He yanked her head back, pressing the knife blade into her flesh and drawing blood. She could feel the drops of warm liquid running down her neck.

Lightning filled the room and she saw the sickness, the hatred, in his eyes.

"Please." Lacey's knees buckled and she leaned back against the kitchen counter. Tears sprang to her eyes: Her hair was being pulled out by the roots.

"Please, oh please," Wayne said, mocking her. "Poor Lacey's all alone. Poor Lacey's going to get what's coming to her."

Lacey reached out and found the vase that was sitting behind her on the counter. Then she found the strength to swing it forward, knocking the knife from his hand. She turned sideways and slammed the vase across his right kneecap.

An agonized grunt escaped his lips. He let go of her hair and sank to the floor on his good knee. She jumped past him and swung the vase around again, but he latched on to her ankle, causing her to lose her balance and her grip on the vase. It shattered as she fell backwards onto the tile floor.

Thunder rolled and lightning flashed, and they both saw the butcher knife under the table, just inches away.

Wayne scrambled towards the razor-sharp weapon, and Lacey knew she didn't have a chance.

Run to the cellar. Run.

She got to her feet and flew blindly across the room to the cellar door. Her fingers found the doorknob instantly. She could hear Wayne stumbling after her, knocking over chairs in his haste.

He was closer than she thought. Before she could close the cellar door, he lashed out with the knife and cut her across the left arm. The pain made her dizzy, but she didn't let it slow her down.

He lashed out again and she slammed the door on his arm with all the force she could muster. The knife fell out of his hand and clattered down the basement steps.

Wayne bellowed with rage. He grabbed the back of Lacey's nightshirt as she started down the stairs, but she turned and fought him, raking her fingernails across his face, trying to reach his eyes.

He clamped a hand over her wounded arm, and she thought she would faint. Her blood was dripping onto the steps, and as he tried to drag her backwards, his foot slipped and they both slid down the rough wooden stairs, hitting the basket of chestnuts at the bottom.

Lacey tried to crawl away, but Wayne grabbed her by the legs and flipped her over onto her back. He began moving forward to straddle her.

Sobbing, she reached out into the blackness, searching for a weapon.

Wayne was going to strangle her, she knew. He was going to finish the job this time – and he would make sure she suffered first.

Lacey found her weapon.

She sat up and ground the chestnut bur into Wayne's face. He let out a shriek and rolled off of her, cursing.

She struggled to her feet and ran, hearing his miserable laughter follow.

"There's no way out for you, sweetheart," he said. "You can run, but you can't hide forever."

Lacey slowed down when she thought she was close to the north wall shelving. She eased behind it and found the door to the coal bin, cringing at the noise made by the rusty metal hinges.

After she climbed inside and pulled the door shut, she grabbed hold of the wooden-handled shovel and backed into a corner.

Lacey settled down to wait, coughing softly from the dust that had been disturbed by her entry. She could hear Wayne moving around the basement, throwing things and shouting obscenities.

"Lacey, honey, I slashed the tires on your pretty new car. You can't even drive away. Come out, come out, wherever you are."

She was cold, and she had lost enough blood to make her lightheaded. Maybe she would end up dying in the coal bin. Maybe she would haunt this place just like her grandmother.

There was a low rumble of thunder, and then Lacey heard a sound right outside the coal bin

door. She got up stiffly and went to stand beside it, the shovel raised and ready.

She waited in this position for what felt like decades. Nothing. She couldn't hear Wayne anymore.

Exhausted, Lacey returned to her corner, cradling the shovel. She wiped the tears off her face with the back of her sticky, bloody hand. She hadn't even realized she was crying.

She stared into the pitch-blackness – and suddenly it wasn't so dark anymore, it wasn't so cold. She looked up and saw a pinpoint of light hovering near the ceiling.

It quickly expanded into a brilliant ball of pulsating energy.

Lacey stood, leaning back against the wall. She heard noises above her now – from outside. Her eyes fell on the wooden coal chute.

And she knew. She finally understood the simple truth: She could run, but she could never, ever hide.

The ball of light disappeared into the ceiling just as Wayne flung open the metal door above her head. He slid down the chute and landed solidly in the middle of the cinderblock floor.

Lacey could hear his heavy breathing.

He flicked his cigarette lighter on and turned around. There was a hammer in his left hand.

She stepped forward. "Goodbye, Wayne."

With every ounce of strength she still possessed, Lacey swung the shovel in a wide arc, striking the side of his head. The sickening

sound echoed around the room as he crumpled to the floor.

She moved closer and stood over him in the darkness, listening. But there was only silence.

***

Lacey made sure the monster was dead before she left the coal bin. Despite the pain that wracked her body, she felt safe and calm. Nothing else could hurt her now.

All the lights were on when she went upstairs. The storm was over.

After calling the sheriff and wrapping her injured arm in a clean towel, she went out and sat on the front stoop, taking the night air deep into her lungs. She was covered with blood and coal dust, and the fresh, moist breeze felt good on her skin.

Lacey gazed up hopefully at the bright stars that stretched into eternity.

“I’m still here, Granny,” she said. “And I’ll never have to run again.”

Frankie Revetta's Favorite Chair

Joe Sullivan could easily understand why the bar was called the Hideaway Inn. He'd heard that the place had been the favorite hangout of a number of Chicago gangsters back in the 20s and 30s – and no wonder: It was pretty damned hard to find.

The dense foliage along the pitch-dark country road made it even harder for him to see the scarce landmarks he had been told to look for.

"Man, where are you taking us?" asked Lou, from the back seat of Joe's Bronco. "We goin' on a cross-country tour, or what?"

Joe laughed. "Keep your panties on girls. We have to be getting close now."

"Yeah, well, we better be," Howie said, his voice strained. He was sitting next to Lou. "I gotta piss like a racehorse – and lose about fifteen pounds."

Joe suddenly made a sharp right turn onto a gravel road, causing his corpulent friend Ray to slam into his side.

"Whoa!"

"Watch it!"

"Give us a break, man!"

"Sorry guys. This is it – up here on the left."

Joe pulled into the small, crowded lot and parked on the far right side, underneath a giant maple. The four men stepped out of the air-conditioned Bronco into the humid August night and headed over to the two-story frame building's dimly lit entrance.

"Man, you mean to tell me we drove thirty-three miles outside Chicago for this dump?" Lou asked, shaking his head.

Joe punched him in the arm. "Look, give it a chance, will ya? The place has atmosphere."

Howie groaned and farted. "It better have a toilet – that's what it better have."

Joe opened the heavy oak door and they trailed into the bar single file. It was warm and stuffy – only a little less uncomfortable than the weather outside.

The place was packed with dubious looking characters, either playing pool or shuffling cards. A light gray cloud – a mixture of cigarette and cigar smoke – hung thick in the air at eyelevel. The antique jukebox on the other side of the narrow room was booming out a ballad by Brenda Lee.

She was soooo sorry.

"Yeah, I tell ya what I'm sorry about," Ray said, yawning, "we've come all this way and they ain't a babe in sight – and not one fuckin' free table either. I can't drink standing up, ya know."

Howie scrambled up the open staircase on their right, following the restroom signs.

"Relax, Ray," Joe said, grinning. "I see a table in that far corner over there. You guys grab it and I'll order up some beers."

Joe worked his way through the maze of cluttered tables and leaned on the mahogany bar. The middle-aged bartender looked even shadier than his customers. He was built like a gorilla, and was almost as hairy. Joe figured he'd been a bouncer in the past.

Probably still was.

The bartender set down a tall glass he'd been about to dry and gave Joe's average, slender frame the once-over.

"I'm Mel, the owner, in case there's any complaints," he said, sounding bored. "So, Red, what'll it be?"

"The name's Joe, actually. Four Coronas – if you have it."

"Course we do. You think we're all hicks out here?"

"Sorry."

Joe paid the tab and carried the beer bottles – two necks in each hand – over to the table his friends now occupied. His work boots made a *schlick-schlick* sound the whole way.

"Man, looks like you're gonna have to cop a squat on this mucked-up floor," Lou said, smirking. "We couldn't find another chair."

Howie looked relieved and apologetic. "I just beat you back from the john."

"What about that chair up there?" Ray pointed to the oak-paneled wall behind Joe. "Nobody seems to wanna use it."

"I will." Joe passed out the beers. "Hell, it's the fanciest seat in the house."

In fact, it looked out of place. The antique seemed to be made of rosewood, and had intricately carved arms and legs. The seat and back were covered in crushed red velvet.

A plank sticking out of the wall supported the seat. Feeling a little guilty, Joe lifted the chair off and set it on the floor next to the table.

Somebody unplugged the jukebox and Connie Francis died a slow, agonizing death.

"Hey, Red! I wouldn't sit in that chair if I was you." Mel's swarthy face wore a bulldog expression.

The bar fell silent. Everyone turned to stare.

"Why not?" Joe shot back. "Is it priceless or something?"

Mel put his beefy hands on his acre-wide hips. "That was mobster Frankie Revetta's favorite chair. Nobody was allowed to sit in it but him."

"So? He's dead now, right?"

"Since '36. Little Guy Campo was standing right where you are now when he filled Frankie's gut full of holes. That chair's been cursed ever since."

Lou snickered. "Better watch out there, Joe. If you sit in that chair, your dick might rot

clean off."

Ray and Howie burst out laughing.

"Well, I think I'll take my chances anyway," Joe said.

Mel glared at him. "If you sit in that chair, you'll be dead in twenty-four hours, guaranteed."

Ray and Howie stopped laughing.

Lou whistled a shortened version of *The Twilight Zone* theme song.

"Do you actually believe that superstitious crap?" Joe asked Mel.

"My grandfather believed it, my father believed, and I believe it – because it's true. I've seen shit happen with my own eyes. Why do you think I hung that chair on the wall in the first place? I'm too afraid to destroy it."

Joe crossed his arms. "Twenty-four hours, eh? Are you willing to bet on it?"

For a few seconds, the room got so quiet Joe could hear his own breathing.

Howie coughed nervously and rubbed the sweat off his bald spot. "Uh, Joe, buddy, maybe this ain't such a good idea."

"Yeah, why tempt fate?" Ray added. "Working on skyscrapers is dangerous enough."

"Tomorrow is Sunday." Joe sank into the chair and stretched out his legs. "And just for the record, people, I sat down at exactly a quarter after ten."

"This is nothing but a big, fat load of bullshit," Lou said. "Everybody place your bets."

"Okay, okay." Mel waved his arms. "I tried to warn you smart-ass, narrow-minded little

pricks, but you didn't want to listen. So here's the deal: If Red here ain't dead in twenty-four hours, I'll give him this whole damned bar – lock, stock and barrel."

***

Twenty-three hours and forty-five minutes later, Joe Sullivan still counted himself among the living. He pounded on the door of the Hideaway Inn at ten o'clock sharp.

The bar closed early on Sundays.

Joe waited another minute and then banged on the door again.

"Knock it off – I'm coming." Mel unlocked the door and swung it open. His face registered surprise. "You. I'm surprised you're still around."

"I've never felt better, and I just thought I'd prove it." Joe gestured past him towards the deserted room. "Can we talk business?"

Mel stepped aside without a word. Joe strolled in and looked around.

Yeah, he could get used to owning a place like this. It would be a healthy supplement to his construction job. Maybe he'd be able to retire from the grind a little early.

Mel continued where he left off – clearing tables and stuffing extra-hefty garbage bags.

Joe noticed that the antique chair had been mounted on the wall again. He'd definitely put up a fight if Mel tried to renege on their wager. A

whole roomful of witnesses had seen them shake hands on it.

Joe checked his watch. "Seems like you're going to lose that bet for sure, but look on the bright side: I'll still need a bartender."

Mel stared at him in a way that made the hair on the back of his neck start to quiver.

"You should be dead. The curse has never failed before." Mel shook his head. "I just don't understand what went wrong."

Joe smiled. "I don't believe in curses – maybe that's what went right."

Mel let go of the bulging garbage bag and straightened his back. "A deal's a deal, then. The deed to the place is around here somewhere. I'll find it later."

"Good." Joe rubbed his hands together. "I'll have my lawyer get in touch with you first thing tomorrow."

"I'll be around."

Joe turned his back on Mel and headed for the door.

"Hey, Red. One more thing."

Joe looked over his shoulder in time to see Mel swing the chair.

Then everything went nauseatingly black.

***

The pain soon melted away and Joe felt like he was floating. He didn't have a care in the world – and no sense of time or place.

But then, suddenly, he started to see things. He began to hear noises: people talking and laughing. Sometimes he could hear music. It all seemed far away at first, but gradually something – some unseen force – pulled him closer and closer to the action.

Until one day…

"Hey, kid, snap out of it, will ya? You're as dead as a mackerel – get used to it already!"

Joe tried hard to focus. He saw his legs first. He had on jeans and a bright red T-shirt – the same clothes he'd been wearing the night he...died?

He was sitting on a chair – *the* chair. It was still hanging on the wall.

Joe looked around the empty, dimly lighted room.

"Over here, kid," said the gravely voice.

A short, stocky man in a double-breasted pinstriped suit was leaning back against the bar, fanning himself with a matching blue fedora.

"Jeez, I thought you'd never materialize. It's been over three months now since...well, you know." The man sighed. "That schmuck Melvin Campo is just like his great-uncle. Never could think things through. Little Guy should-a known my boys would bump him off for clippin' me. And now Mel is headed to the big house."

Joe decided he could probably talk. "If you're Frankie Revetta, then that means I'm really dead."

Frankie gave a short laugh. "Worse than that, kid. You're in limbo. Just like me. Although,

my future's lookin' up – or down, whatever the case might be. All I know is, it won't be boring no more."

Joe stared at the floor. "How do I get down from here?"

"The same as if you was alive: jump."

Joe grinned sheepishly. His landing was soft.

He approached the smiling, craggy-faced gangster. "Okay, I'm dead. I accept that. Now when do I get to move on?"

Frankie lifted a shoulder. "That's just it, kid – you don't. I gotta admit, you gotta bum deal. I mean, at least I deserved those slugs I took in the breadbasket. I was screwin' around with Little Guy's old lady, and I whacked a few of his relatives, too." He shook his head. "But you? A lamb to the slaughter."

Joe stared at him. "You know, I wouldn't have been murdered if you hadn't cursed that chair."

"Believe you me, if I'd known I was gonna be tied to it for this long, I would-a kept my stupid trap shut."

"Are you telling me we're both stuck here for eternity?"

"Not exactly. I've already done my time." Frankie put on his fedora and turned down the brim. "The chair has a new owner now."

The gangster's form started to waver and fade.

Joe panicked. "Wait a minute – you can't just leave me here alone. I don't know what to do next."

Frankie vanished, but Joe heard his gravely voice one more time.

“There ain’t nothin’ you *can* do, kid. The chair is yours.” His disembodied laughter filled the room. “I’m outta this joint.”

Red Barchetta

Seventeen-year-old Charles McKinnon's nerdiness factor had completely disappeared thanks to her. He was cool now and über-popular. She was sexy and lightning fast – better than a steady girlfriend.

Charles had just been accepted into Harvard – his father's dream, not his. But it didn't matter. He'd been rewarded with the one thing he'd wanted most since the age of thirteen: a red Fiat Barchetta – a two-seater Italian sports car, baby.

For her, Charles had let his dark brown hair grow longer, tossed out his preppy clothing, and had even switched to contacts so he could show off the fake "troubled" look in his blue eyes, á la James Dean.

Yeah, the expensive new toy had changed his life. Even college girls wanted to be seen with him.

On the weekends, he would take his dates for a drive up Pacific Highway, a road that hugged the rocky coastline between Santa Carla and Carmel. Lots of sharp curves to get a guy's adrenalin pumping – and scare the girls so badly they would

scream and bury their pretty faces in his black leather jacket.

Kickass.

After graduation in June, he scored big with one of the nineteen-year-old college girls he'd been trying to impress for months. Her name was Gypsy Pinella. She was the real deal – a free spirit who didn't give a damn what the world thought of her dark makeup, outrageous clothes and fiery red hair.

This gal was loads of dangerous fun.

"Christ, Charlie, can't you go any faster?"

He couldn't scare Gypsy. Hell, she would stand up in the convertible – holding on to the top of the windshield – while he screeched around all the tightest curves.

Charles laughed. "I'm glad you're not driving. You're a frickin' loon."

Gypsy plopped back into her seat, swept aside her windblown locks, and stared at him with reproachful, remarkable green eyes. "You wouldn't let me drive this car?"

"Not on this road I wouldn't." Probably not anywhere, actually.

She stuck out her full lower lip, pouting. It looked real cute.

"Forget it, babe."

Gypsy smiled. "Bet I'll change your mind. I can handle a stick better than you think."

Before Charles knew what was happening, the redhead had his jeans unzipped and was stroking him hard and fast. He almost lost his grip on the

wheel, and barely managed to downshift soon enough to handle the next curve.

"Not fair," he said, moaning.

She giggled. "You like it though, don't ya?"

Charles didn't have to answer that question with words.

***

Over the next five days, Charles gave in to Gypsy twice, letting her drive his pride and joy around on some of the low-traffic inland roads. She scared the hell out of him, like he knew she would.

The next Saturday evening, with the tipsy redhead laughing beside him, he cruised back over to Pacific Highway. It was payback time for those two near heart attacks she'd given him earlier that week - though he doubted he could really freak her out.

The salty air felt cooler than usual and Gypsy was acting wilder than he'd ever seen her. She kicked off her high-heeled sandals and stood up in the seat as the Barchetta zoomed down the first straightaway. The savage wind tore at her thin, tie-dyed t-shirt, outlining her small, perky breasts.

Charles had trouble keeping his eyes on the road. He appreciated the view, sure, but he was also getting worried.

"Hey, babe, enough of the daring 'tude. Sit down and hold on to *me* for a change."

Gypsy threw her head back and laughed. “I want to fly, Charlie.”

She released her grip on the car altogether and stretched both arms out and back, pretending to soar.

“Gypsy, cut it out. I mean it.”

Charles looked back at the road and downshifted, preparing to take another sharp curve. Just as he squealed into the bend, the car’s right front tire hit a cavernous pothole.

In a matter of seconds, Gypsy was gone.

***

Three nights later, Charles woke up shaking and sweating and feeling like he had to vomit – feeling like he had when he’d first seen Gypsy’s slight, broken body crumpled across a pile of sharp stones.

The awful memories rushed back.

God, he hadn’t been able to think at first. He knew he’d be blamed. What if his father’s money failed to help him escape all the charges? He would still lose his license and his most prized possession – the Fiat Barchetta.

Gypsy was barely alive when he found her by the side of the road. Charles told himself there was no way she would survive – there was no way an ambulance would arrive in time to save her.

It wasn’t his fault. The girl was crazy. He’d warned her to be careful. Why should he have to suffer for her foolish mistake?

Charles knew he had to act quickly before another car happened upon the scene. He threw off his leather jacket, gathered Gypsy up in his arms, and hurried over to the other side of the highway, to the sheer, rocky drop off above the churning sea.

Christ, could he really do this? Could he live with himself afterwards?

The sun was setting fast.

Bile rose into his throat and he choked it back, tears filling his eyes. He had no choice.

Charles took a deep breath and laid Gypsy on the ground, at the cliff's edge. Just before he rolled her body over, he thought he saw her eyelids flicker open.

But it was too late to stop her from falling.

He didn't look afterwards. No, he couldn't. He had to get moving. He had to get home, make sure he got rid of his bloody t-shirt and any other evidence left behind.

And that's exactly what he did – never thinking of the nightmares to follow.

***

Charles felt sure he'd covered his tracks, so he wasn't really worried about being connected to Gypsy's death – if her body was ever discovered. Her disappearance was in the news, but as far as he knew, no one had even seen them together on that last terrible day. The police hadn't come calling.

He just needed to stay busy to keep the bad memories and guilt feelings from haunting him.

Ten days after the "incident," he met a foreign exchange student his age, a pretty, dark-eyed French girl named Noelle. She had a sweet, innocent smile and an adorable accent.

Noelle was the total opposite of Gypsy.

Charles had liked her right off, and he didn't have long to impress her. She'd be returning to Paris the following week, so he spent the next several days showing Noelle the sights around Santa Carla. He avoided taking her up Pacific Highway until the evening before she was scheduled to fly home.

For some reason, he felt compelled to drive by the spot where Gypsy had died – where he had killed her. He took that same curve more slowly than the last time, but Noelle still let out a shriek and grabbed his arm.

"Sharles, please, be careful."

He smiled at her reassuringly. "Don't worry – this car is like a part of me. I know what our limits are."

Another, familiar voice spoke up from behind him. "Well, I sure as hell wish *I'd* known. Maybe I'd be sitting in Frenchie's place right now – still alive."

Charles thought he might be losing his mind. That sounded like Gypsy.

His vision blurred for a moment and he got lightheaded. He forced himself to look in the rearview mirror.

Gypsy was sprawled across the back of the sports car. She met his gaze in the mirror with a smug, little smile. She looked perfectly normal – wearing the clothes she'd died in.

"Christ." Charles almost swerved off the road.

Noelle squealed. "That is not funny. No more games."

Gypsy let out an exaggerated yawn. "God, what a killjoy. I can't believe you replaced *moi* with such a wimpy chick, Charlie. You could've done a lot better."

"Shut up," Charles said, staring at Gypsy via the rearview mirror. "You're not real. You're not really here."

"What do you mean, chéri?" Noelle gave him a puzzled look. "Are you angry with me?"

Charles shook his head. "No, I'm not talking to you. Just got something on my mind right now, that's all."

Gypsy's shrill laughter rang in his ears. "I'm just a guilt trip, is that what you think, Charlie?"

He took the next curve dangerously fast, hoping more speed would somehow slingshot the impossible vision into oblivion. But it didn't work.

Noelle was staring at him, her dark eyes full of fear. "What is wrong, Sharles? Please tell me."

"Yeah, tell her Charlie. Honesty is the best policy in any new relationship, right?"

Charles gripped the steering wheel more tightly, his palms sweaty. “This just isn’t happening.”

“Oh, chill out, baby,” Gypsy said, sighing. “I’m not back for revenge. Hell, if I’d been in your shoes, maybe I’d have done the same thing. I just wanted one more, wild ride for old time’s sake. You understand?”

Charles swallowed hard and downshifted for another tight turn. Still too fast. The tires left the pavement for several seconds before he got control again.

Noelle let loose with what could only have been a string of French cuss words. “Take me home, Sharles. Now, please.”

“Hmmmm, better do what Frenchie asks, Charlie. She might just try to jump out of the car if you don’t. Then you’d have another mess to clean up.”

Charles swung into a scenic overlook, turned around, and headed south again. His head hurt so bad he thought his skull was going to explode. He glanced in the rearview mirror and saw that Gypsy was now standing up, her arms outstretched just like before.

She laughed. “No need to worry, Charlie. That’s the good thing about being dead – nothing worse can happen to you.”

Noelle was staring straight ahead, her arms crossed, a frown on her heart-shaped face.

Charlie put a hand on her knee. “I’m sorry, Noelle.” She had to think he was a raving lunatic.

“Oh, she’s not the girl for you, Charlie. Forget about her.”

I really am going crazy, he thought, and for a second he was afraid he might start to hyperventilate.

No, get a grip. Maybe it was just a temporary break from stress. He’d recover as soon as he got home. All he had to do was stay off Pacific Highway in the future.

Charles took the curves more carefully, trying not to piss Noelle off even more. As they once again approached the tragic spot where it all happened, his chest got tighter and his breathing became shallower.

He glanced in the mirror again. Gypsy had disappeared.

Charles let out a heavy sigh of relief, his hands trembling on the wheel. She was really gone.

Noelle giggled and lifted her arms above her head, stretching luxuriously. She practically purred. “Oh, this feels intoxicating. I love it.”

Her accent had disappeared. She sounded like Gypsy.

Charles’ mouth dropped open as Noelle stood up in her seat. She held on to the top of the windshield and threw her head back, laughing hysterically, her black curls dancing in the ocean breeze.

“What the hell are you doing?” Charles looked back at the road. The infamous curve was approaching.

“I want to fly, Charlie.”

“Stop it, Noelle – Gypsy – whoever the hell you are.”

More laughter. “Okay, baby. I’ll sit down again, just like you want.”

The girl that was supposed to be Noelle fell back into the seat and clutched his arm tightly, hiding her face against his leather jacket.

Charles hit the curve a little too fast. “Christ Almighty.”

“Remember when I said I didn’t want revenge, Charlie?” The possessed Noelle looked up at him with one of Gypsy’s wicked expressions. “That was a big, fat lie.”

She grabbed the wheel and wrenched it sharply to the right. There was no guardrail to slow them down.

Charles struggled frantically, trying to regain control of the car, but there was no time to recover.

His shrieks of terror competed with Gypsy’s wild laughter as the red Barchetta shot out into open space above the roiling sea. It seemed to hover in midair for a short, hopeful eternity before tilting forward and plummeting two hundred feet to the rocky shore below.

Playground for the Dead

Midnight had come again at last. A bright harvest moon illuminated the abandoned school's playground and the air was crisp and still. Lily sat down on a chilly wooden bench to wait for them. She listened carefully for some sign of their arrival, hoping to catch a glimpse of their ethereal forms in the pure moonlight.

Wade Elementary was cursed, so thought the citizens of Bluefield. Freak accidents, unexplained deaths – no wonder a new grade school had been built. But Lily felt safe here, safe and loved. Her children had no memory of their deaths, but they always recognized their mother. She had been able to see all five of their spirits grow older, aging faster month to month.

The fact her dead babies could age at all was proof to Lily that they were otherworldly, and perhaps redeemed. She had killed them all before their first birthdays to save their souls. The narrow copse of trees behind the playground hid their tiny graves. Lily now lived within walking distance of the school so she could visit them every night.

A sudden breeze jostled the swings, causing their rusty chains to creak. The lonesome merry-go-round began to turn.

Their sweet voices finally reached her on the wind. “Moooommmyyyy.”

Lily stood, her eyes scanning the playground. “Yes, I’m here, darlings. Mommy’s here.”

She spotted Joseph, her oldest child, first. He was climbing the big slide. Sarah, Patrick and Erin made the swings move to and fro. Little Sean sat on Sarah’s lap.

Huddled together on the school’s steps, close to the entrance, were the spirits of three other children – two boys and a girl. They did not belong to Lily. She had first noticed their presence two years before, but she had never been able to coax them out onto the playground. Lily felt sorry for them because they always seemed lost and afraid.

Lost….Lily had been afraid this fate would befall her own babies. She could never escape the evil hidden inside her soul. Lily had no idea how she had become pregnant once a year for the last five years. She still suffered from blackouts that would last all night. Always at dawn, she would wake up in her own bed - naked, dirty and alone.

Lily had been raised at St. Joseph’s Orphanage in New Orleans. On her twelfth birthday, Father Samuel O'Halloran had sat her down in his office and had warned her that she had a wicked side that must always be held in check. Lily hadn’t wanted to believe it. She had tried hard to be a good Catholic and prove the priest wrong. But then the blackouts started to happen not long after she turned sixteen. That spring she discovered she was

pregnant, but she had no memory of how it had happened. She still felt like a virgin.

Lily couldn't stand the thought of having the baby aborted. It was against her faith. But she couldn't stay at the orphanage, either, and face humiliation.

She ran away and headed north, hoping to reach New York City. When the money she had saved ran out in West Virginia, she settled in Bluefield. The people at the shelter were sympathetic and helped her find a job at a local supermarket. In her sixth month of pregnancy, Lily took a job as a companion and housekeeper to an elderly rich widow who lived on Bluefield Avenue. Mrs. Warrick was blind and deaf enough not to care what Lily did.

The baby was born a week after she moved into the mansion. There had been very little pain during labor, and the infant had appeared to be full-term instead of premature.

Joseph Samuel had her black hair and olive complexion. He rarely cried. By the time he learned to smile, Lily knew something was wrong. She could see the evil inside him when she looked into his dark eyes. They were her eyes.

It had to be her fault, and she felt compelled to save him. Every night for several weeks, she got down on her knees by his crib and prayed for guidance. She asked for courage to do what needed to be done.

Joseph was nine months old when she drowned him in the bathtub. It had been so hard to do the right thing. She could tell no one. No one would

understand how much love and faith it had taken to save her baby's soul.

And her heart would be broken four more times. The birth control pills she had felt guilty about taking were ineffective. The other children were born tainted by her wickedness as well. They were even younger than Joseph when she took their lives. She smothered each of them with a pillow because she couldn't bear to see the fear on their little faces.

But Lily never wavered in her resolve, never once doubted the righteousness of her actions. Her babies were better off now, and they would always be with her. Their spirits would live on and grow up here on this playground for the dead.

"Moooommyy."

Lily smiled. "I'm watching you, Joey."

Joseph whooshed down the slide and floated through the air for several feet before landing on the dilapidated merry-go-round. It began to turn again, slowly, with a faint screeching sound.

Lily noticed that the three lost children were staring at her with forlorn expressions.

"Joey, why won't your friends play?"

Joseph looked over at the trio on the school's front steps. "They don't like us, Mommy. Me and Sarah and Patrick just wanted to be friends – we wanted them to stay here with us. We didn't mean to hurt them."

"Hurt them? How did you do that?"

"We just hugged them really hard – all of us at the same time. It made them sick and they died, but now they won't play."

Lily wanted to cry. How could her innocent babies hurt anyone?

She heard a noise behind her - the rustle of dead leaves.

Lily whirled around and let out a gasp of surprise. “Father O'Halloran?”

The priest stood only a few feet away from her, looking handsome and young in his somber black garb. The tails of his long overcoat fluttered in the cool breeze.

“Hello, Lily. I’ve missed you.”

His melodious voice – Lily realized how much she’d been longing to hear it.

“How…how did you find me?”

“I’ve known your whereabouts for several months now. I understand why you ran away, Lily. I needed to see if my interference was necessary.”

“I don’t want to be wicked, Father,” Lily said, her voice breaking. “I didn’t want my children to be damned.”

Samuel O'Halloran gave her a sad smile. “None of what’s happened is your fault. I thought I knew what I was doing when I saved you from your mother. You were partly my child – half angel. Fallen angel now, of course. For my failure, I agreed to become human. I wanted to raise you and protect you.”

Lily shook her head. “I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“Mommy, who are you talking to?” Joseph was floating above the merry-go-round, watching the priest with concerned interest. Her other children were staring at him as well.

“Hello, there, young man.” Father O'Halloran tipped his hat to Joseph.

Lily forced herself to smile. “He’s just an old friend, Joey. All of you – go on and play, now.” She wasn’t at all surprised that the priest could see her babies.

Father O'Halloran moved a step closer to Lily. “I know you don’t understand, and I’m so sorry. You deserve to know the truth. Your mother is the demon Lilith. She’s part succubus and a murderer of infants. I was once the angel called Sansenoy. I was sent on a mission to destroy her, but she seduced me while we were in human form and became pregnant.”

Lily stared into his hypnotic eyes and knew he spoke the truth. “You mean, I’m part demon, too?”

“Yes, and the evil spirit in you is stronger than I feared.”

“Help me, Father. What can I do? How can I change?”

He sighed. “You can’t, child. You were never meant to exist. It’s time I set you free.”

The priest pulled back his overcoat and brought out the gleaming silver sword he’d been hiding. He raised it high in the air.

“Forgive me, Lily.”

She trusted him, loved him. She never even thought to scream or run.

Father O'Halloran swung the sword with both hands and decapitated Lily right in front of her dead children. He watched with a heavy heart as her dual spirits – one demon and one angel – fought each other. The evil entity proved

stronger, but its victory was short-lived - it was soon pulled, shrieking, into hell.

Lily’s offspring had been mostly human, and too innocent for eternal damnation. Without their mother’s presence anchoring them to the earth, they would soon move on, either to limbo or heaven.

The priest turned to walk back to his car, and suddenly stumbled. A paralyzing iciness engulfed him so completely that he could no longer move or speak. He dropped the sword, struggling to breathe. His ears were filled with the sound of shrill young voices, angry and accusing.

“Father, Father, Father! You hurt Mommy.”

Samuel O'Halloran wanted to tell his grandchildren that he loved them, that he was sorry - but a suffocating darkness claimed him too soon.

The Power of Moonlight

Bobby Lee Blackburn got killed exactly three weeks before he was to marry his childhood sweetheart at the New Hope Baptist Church. He died just the way he feared he would - deep underground, alone in the dark, his body entombed forever.

Priscilla Stevens had decided to worship Bobby Lee when they were seven years old. On the day she fell in love, he'd been chasing her around Old Man Griffey's fish pond and she'd tripped and fallen in. Bobby Lee had grabbed hold of her long, strawberry-blonde ponytail and had yanked her out of the water before she could drown.

That boy would always be her hero, even after he broke her heart.

They were twelve the first time he left her. His daddy found a better job over in Virginia, and he and his parents moved away from Harlan County. Pris had cried herself to sleep every night for two weeks, keeping her Granny Maeve awake.

About a month after Bobby Lee had gone away, the old lady woke Pris late one night and told her they'd be taking a walk up the winding mountain trail behind their farmhouse. The two of them sneaked down the back staircase and left without waking Pris' mother.

The full October moon revealed the goldenrod in bloom, and the air smelled crisp and clean and dry. Granny Maeve's knees cracked and popped a little during the climb, but otherwise no sound could be heard except for a light wind rustling through the trees. Nestled in the narrow valley below, the coal town of Russell Fork had fallen silent, with only a few lights left twinkling to give away its presence.

They kept going until they reached a rocky plateau, barren except for a lone sycamore tree. Granny Maeve found a large flat stone to sit on and motioned for Priscilla to join her.

"This spot will do. We can see the Blood Moon and it can see us."

Pris wondered why it was called a Blood Moon when it wasn't even red, but she stayed quiet and watched as her grandma fished around in the pockets of her gray wool sweater. The old woman pulled out a small vial of what she called her "sacred" oil, and then a photograph. The picture had been taken at Pris' birthday party in January. Her mother, Dorie, had snapped a photo of Pris and Bobby Lee sitting next to each other at the kitchen table. Pris was leaning forward, getting ready to blow out the candles on her chocolate cake.

"An only child and an only child," Granny Maeve muttered. She smeared a dab of oil onto the picture and handed it to Priscilla. "You want your friend to come home again, don't you?"

Pris stared at her grandmother, and nodded.

"Well, you can use the power of moonlight just like your granny can. Most folks around here don't believe in such things, and them that do don't think it's right to use the gift, so you best keep quiet about what we're up to - don't you even tell your mama."

"I promise I won't, Granny."

"All right, then. For this spell to work, the moonlight's power has to be mixed with the truth, girl, and the truth is in your tears. You have to cry for Bobby Lee if you want him back - show your love and your need for him, and let your tears fall like rain on that picture so he knows how you feel."

Pris held the photograph up close to her face. Moonlight reflected off the shiny oiled surface. Bobby Lee's perfect dark eyes smiled up at her. She missed him so much her body ached with the pain.

The tears came easy.

Granny Maeve patted her gently on the back as she sobbed. "That's good, my darlin'. Now talk to him, out loud, and tell him what you want."

Pris took a deep, shaky breath, tasting the saltiness of her own tears. She gazed up at the moon's brilliant face.

"Bobby Lee, come back to me. Come back to me, please."

She repeated the phrases several times until her grandma told her she could stop. Wispy gray clouds had drifted across the moon.

"There now, child. It's done."

Granny Maeve spoke the truth. Bobby Lee and his parents moved back to Russell Fork right before Christmas, giving Priscilla the best present she had ever received.

***

During their sophomore year in high school, Bobby Lee fell for Kara Chambers. Pris wasn't surprised - Kara was half-Korean and seemed exotic compared to all the other girls they knew. Her family had made a lot of money during the coal boom of '74. Now they owned the flower shop in town and they also ran a catering business out of their grocery store.

Everybody talked about how perfect Kara and Bobby Lee were for each other and what a striking couple they made with their dark good looks. It wounded Pris to see them together, but she felt certain that one day Bobby Lee would realize Kara wasn't right for him and that his best friend was also his true soul mate.

Even though Granny Maeve could have shown her how to speed up such an epiphany, Pris didn't want to win Bobby Lee's heart by using magic. No, his love for her had to be real or it would never last.

It was better to remain hopeful and suffer the wait.

In the meantime, Pris learned all she could from her grandmother about the power of moonlight. She dated a few boys who bored her and a few who didn't. She talked to Bobby Lee

whenever he made time for her. She never complained about the times he wouldn't.

And when Kara dumped Bobby Lee right before graduation, Pris was there to pick up all the fragile little pieces of his heart. In June - on the summer solstice - she took him for a drive up to the top of Black Mountain, the highest peak in Kentucky. Pris made love to Bobby Lee on a rough blanket under the Rose Moon. He was her first.

She opened his eyes. He opened his heart.

Pris felt the power of their love and knew it was real.

"Bobby Lee, will you marry me?"

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Mr. and Mrs. Blackburn insisted they wait two years. Priscilla knew it wasn't because they didn't approve of her. People thought Pris was attractive because of the confidence she showed, and everybody thought she had a sensible way about her.

"Mark my words, now, darlin'," Granny Maeve had told her. "A passionate love can make the sanest person act plumb crazy."

The wedding was still a year off when the old woman passed away in her sleep.

Priscilla's mother had agreed with the Blackburns from the start. "You two have all the time in the world. First thing you need to do is get to work and save some money."

Despite the good pay, Bobby Lee was afraid to become a coal miner like his father, so he went to

work at his uncle’s auto repair shop on the south end of town. Mr. Blackburn liked to tease his son about being claustrophobic, but Pris knew it was the recurring nightmare that kept Bobby Lee from following in his daddy’s footsteps. He started having the dream when he was fifteen and it was always the same - he found himself falling into a dark hole, deep into the earth where no one could hear him scream. The walls of his prison would begin to collapse and he would suffocate.

Pris refused to ridicule Bobby Lee for his fears. He worked hard to be a decent mechanic, and in six months he was able to rent the apartment over his uncle’s garage.

They fell into a comfortable routine, waiting for their wedding day to arrive. Priscilla’s mother owned a diner called Rolly’s, in honor of Pris' late father. Pris waited tables there and raised an herb and vegetable garden for produce to sell on the side. In the spring and summer she sold berries and mountain wildflowers - daisies were her favorite.

During the work week, Bobby Lee would spend his lunch hour with Pris. She’d bring him sandwiches from the restaurant and they would talk about the future and how many children they would have and how one day Bobby Lee might own his own repair shop.

Priscilla’s desire for Bobby Lee only grew stronger as the months wore on. Despite numerous lectures from his devoutly religious parents, they spent time alone together at his apartment. But Pris preferred to make love on her mountain in the

special places she'd discovered while digging ginseng and gathering mushrooms and wildflowers.

Once the weather turned warm, she would take Bobby Lee up there late at night whenever the moon made an appearance. They would lay together on a well-worn patchwork quilt in a hidden meadow surrounded by daisies. Bobby Lee would play with her waist-length hair and weave flowers through the unruly tresses.

Then it would be Pris' turn to play. She'd caress every beautiful inch of him, massaging his tense, sore muscles with scented oils, relishing the way his body responded to her touch - his moans of pleasure sending delicious tingles down her spine. She would wait until her own physical needs overwhelmed her senses before allowing their lust to mix with the moonlight.

Deep in that world of forgetting, Pris would nearly sacrifice her soul becoming one with Bobby Lee. She'd wallow in his essence until they were both spent and shuddering.

Afterwards, she would lay on top of him gasping, clutching handfuls of his damp chest hair - afraid that if she let go, she'd float off the mountain, a victim of euphoria. Bobby Lee would talk softly then, teasing her, knowing she wouldn't be able to respond for several minutes.

"Priscilla, Princess of Moonlight and Magic, I wonder if you're fertile enough to bear me a dozen young'uns in eight years."

***

On the last Saturday in March, Pris' mountain swallowed Bobby Lee Blackburn whole. He'd been helping Priscilla search for mushrooms that afternoon near an abandoned coal mine. A collapsing tunnel system had resulted in what the old-timers called a "mountain break" - a rift in the earth above, this one well-hidden by foliage. The hole Bobby Lee had fallen into was eight feet across and hundreds of feet deep. After three days of risky recovery efforts, rescue workers from a local mining company gave up and went home.

The young man's sudden death shocked all of Russell Fork into a grieving silence. The tragedy was whispered about, though no one - not even the Blackburn family - outwardly blamed Priscilla for the incident.

Pris wanted to lock herself away from the town's sympathetic outpouring, but her mother forced her to attend the funeral.

Bobby Lee's parents chose to have the service on the mountain, close to his final resting place. Volunteers cleared the area of brush and vegetation and set up tents and chairs for the mourners. Bobby Lee's sweet young cousin tearfully sang a few hymns in the sunshine and then a Baptist preacher prayed about the loss that was God's will. A touching eulogy followed, given by Bobby Lee's uncle.

Kara Chambers cried. Priscilla couldn't shed one tear.

No, it wasn’t until after the funeral reception that she gave in to an onslaught of raw emotions. She sobbed all night, constantly reliving the conversation she’d had with Kara at the Blackburns’ house.

Pris had been hiding in a corner of the living room, in view of the buffet. She had no interest in food. The dining room was crammed with hungry, black-clad mourners who would murmur the usual platitudes whenever they bumped into a member of Bobby Lee’s family.

Apparently, Kara didn’t feel like eating either. She approached Priscilla timidly, as if she was afraid Pris might bolt out of her chair and run away.

“What do you want, Kara?”

Bobby Lee’s ex-girlfriend let out a tiny sigh. She looked even prettier when she was sad.

“I hate funerals. I usually don’t know what to say.”

“It would be better if people said nothing at all.”

“Oh. Right.” Kara started to walk away, and then paused. When she turned around again, Pris could see tears glistening on her long eyelashes.

“I was so stupid to break up with Bobby Lee. I only hope you realize how much he truly loved you, Pris.”

Priscilla gave her a frigid stare. “I don’t think you’ll ever understand how we felt about each other.”

"I didn't, but I do now." Kara dabbed her eyes with a tissue. "Look, I'm not telling you this to be mean, but the truth is I thought Bobby Lee got engaged just to make me jealous. He came to see me at The Blossom Shop that morning before he died, and I wanted to believe he was having second thoughts. I…I tried to kiss him, but he stopped me. He was there to place a special order for your wedding night - dozens of daisies for your hotel room down in Bristol."

Pris swallowed hard, suddenly feeling light-headed. *Stop it, Kara. Stop talking and let me go home.*

"People used to think Bobby Lee was crazy about me, but he loved you more, Pris. I could see it in his eyes when he was talking about you, and I just thought you'd want to know."

***

On Saturday, the sixteenth of April, Priscilla dragged herself out of bed and opened the windows in her room. She inhaled the fresh warm air, her vision blurred by tears instead of sunlight.

"It's so beautiful, Bobby Lee. No rain on our wedding day."

She wished there was a terrible storm raging outside. She wished it would destroy Kara's big brick house and her family's businesses and all of Russell Fork.

Pris backed away from the window and eyed the prescription bottle on her nightstand. Just a few of those pills would knock her out for several

hours and when she finally woke up again, this painful day would be over.

But will tomorrow be any better?

Priscilla had been sleeping in Bobby Lee's favorite Wildcats T-shirt. It smelled faintly of his spicy aftershave and she didn't want to change out of it. She had no appetite anyway, so there was no reason to go downstairs. Her mother would be working at the restaurant most of the day.

If only she could talk to Granny Maeve.

Pris swallowed a couple of the little white pills and then walked across the hall into her grandmother's cool, dark bedroom. She crawled over into the middle of the feather mattress and buried herself under the heavy quilt. When she drifted off, she dreamed about the past.

Priscilla was thirteen again, sitting in the rocker in her granny's bedroom, turning the crinkly, delicate pages of a brown leather journal and trying to read the faded passages. The enthralling book of spells and rituals had first belonged to Millicent - Granny Maeve's own grandmother.

Near the middle of the journal, Pris came across a section called The Waking of The Dead. It was a ritual for calling back the spirits of those who had passed on to the other side. Just as she began reading the steps necessary to carry out the ceremony, Granny Maeve walked into the room.

"No, child." The old woman rushed over and snatched the journal out of Priscilla's hands. "You ain't old enough yet to learn these spells."

Her expression softened when she saw the hurt look on Pris' face. "But don't you worry none - it won't be too long before this book is yours."

Priscilla woke up from the dream. *It's mine now.*

She shook off her grogginess and hurried downstairs to make a pot of coffee. Late afternoon sunshine poured into the kitchen.

What had happened to the journal? Granny Maeve had kept it in her nightstand until she'd caught Pris reading it, and then it had been moved.

Priscilla started her search in the cellar, looking through a cedar chest filled with musty-smelling clothes and a bunch of old storage bins that overflowed with greeting cards, letters and photographs. No sign of the diary.

Then she remembered the bookcase in the attic.

***

It was on the bottom shelf behind a locked panel. Pris was too impatient to search for the key. She broke the thin pane of glass with a cast-iron doorstop.

Her mother was waiting for her in the second floor hallway at the top of the main staircase. Dorie stared for a long moment at the leather journal Pris had clutched to her chest and then she looked up at her daughter with tired, sad eyes.

“My little girl,” she whispered. “My poor baby girl.”

“Stop it.” Pris’ voice shook with a sudden anger. “You don’t understand because you never believed.”

“I told your granny not to fill your head with that nonsense,” her mother said, gesturing at the book. “Only time can take your pain away, Prissy. Don’t you think I missed your daddy after he died? Don’t you think I’d have done anything to bring him back if such a thing was possible?”

“You don’t have the gift. Granny Maeve told me so.”

Dorie moved closer and took Pris’ face in her hands. “Honey, Bobby Lee is gone and he ain’t ever coming back. One day you’ll have to accept that.”

***

Pris had eleven days to prepare for the ritual. According to her great-great-grandmother, the Waking Moon of April could bring the dead and dormant back to life and was at its most powerful when full.

She wished the ceremony could be performed sooner. Her heartache was constant. Guilt and grief warred within her, wracking her body, her mind, her soul. All those years ago, Bobby Lee had left her and she’d suffered and cried for him. But she’d brought him home again.

Priscilla had confidence in her abilities. She knew she had the power to summon Bobby Lee’s

spirit. He wouldn't be able to stay with her long, but she could look into his eyes and tell him she was sorry and that she'd always love him.

Then she would say goodbye.

And time? Time would never heal this festering wound. Not even if she found a way to live forever.

***

On the morning of April twenty-seventh, Priscilla stayed home from the diner and made a list of the items needed for the ritual. The forecast called for clear skies that night. Over the last week, she had read Millicent's instructions over and over again to memorize the steps involved. Pris paid particular attention to the narrative parts that described the precautions to be taken and what to expect from the deceased who are called back to the land of the living.

Heed my warning: This greatest of all spells cannot be cast if the Caller does not love the person who has died. Love is the most powerful ingredient in this ritual and it must be true. The best results will be obtained if the spell is worked on the night of the full moon. The spirit will more easily materialize and will be tied to the earthly plane until the Waking Moon begins its descent in the western sky.

Be aware that the spirit of the deceased will have no memory of its death. When they are first called back, the man, woman, or child may seem

confused or disoriented. Have patience and explain to them how they died, then state your purpose for the Summoning. Say your peace and be sincere, for this ritual can only be used once to call your loved one home.

***

Priscilla found a wicker picnic basket in the pantry and placed one of her mother's sharp paring knives inside, along with a container of table salt, a vial of eucalyptus oil, a bandage, a small garden spade, a flashlight, a matchbook, and one white candle. She also put in a photograph of Bobby Lee, taken the previous Christmas, and a lock of his dark hair, which she had "stolen" when they were twelve.

When the moon began to rise, she donned her tea-length, ivory lace wedding gown. She had planned to wear her hair in an old-fashioned upsweep to match the Victorian style of the dress, but then decided to leave it unbound the way Bobby Lee had always preferred to see it.

Since she had to climb a mountain trail, she put on a pair of beaded flat slippers instead of the expensive high heels she had bought for the wedding.

Her mother was working late at the diner. There was no one to question her plans. And there was no one to help her carry them out. Granny Maeve had been dead a year.

Pris left the house, remembering the night her grandmother had first shown her the power of

moonlight.

"Guide me, Granny, if you're able. Help me bring him home again."

***

The moon shone so brightly over the mountain trail that Priscilla didn't need to use the flashlight to find her way. A whip-poor-will seemed to follow her for most of the climb, its mournful song sounding loud in the reverent silence. The sweet-smelling wind played with her hair, making her heart ache for the feel of Bobby Lee's gentle fingers.

His gravesite was an inviting place to visit now. The mayor had donated a wrought-iron bench and the Blackburn family had erected a marker made of marble. Pris had planted red tulips and yellow daffodils around the base of the memorial.

Bobby Lee would always be loved and missed and Priscilla wished she could go back in time and change what had happened. But she could only go forward.

Pris set the picnic basket down on the bench and took out the container of table salt. She walked over to the mountain break, being careful not to step too close to the edge, and began pouring the salt out in a thin line away from it. This would keep Bobby Lee's spirit from wandering away - he would not be able to venture over the line of salt for any reason. Pris didn't want him to see his name on the front of the marble marker, so she was careful to stay behind both it and the

bench as she circled back to the other side of the grave.

She took out the garden spade next and knelt beside the deep, dark chasm. She began shoveling crumbly soil from the edge of the break onto the ground in front of her, making a thick circle. If Bobby Lee had been buried in a normal grave, the circle would have been made in its center, but hopefully this would do. Inside the ring of dirt she placed Bobby Lee's picture and the lock of his hair. She poured the eucalyptus oil onto the items, making the shape of a pentagram. Then she lit the candle, letting the wax drip down onto the photograph before touching the flame to the oil.

While the circle of fire burned, she stood with the paring knife and pushed up the lacy sleeve on her left arm. Tears would not be enough to wake the dead. It would take her blood.

She did the deed quickly, knowing that it would hurt worse if she hesitated. The razor-sharp blade cut lightly and cleanly across her upturned wrist. She winced only a little, letting the drops of blood fall into the fire.

Pris dropped the knife and raised her face to the night sky. The wind made the gray smoke from the small fire spiral high into the air. It seemed to caress the glowing moon.

As she stared at it, the bright orb appeared to move closer to the earth. It was time.

She turned towards the grave and stretched out her right arm, as if she were about to take her lover's hand.

“Bobby Lee, come back to me. Come back to me now.”

The silence of the grave seeped out into the night and everything became still. The breeze died, the birds and insects made no noise, the smoldering remains of the fire were snuffed out.

Pris cleared her throat and took a deep breath.

“Come to me, Bobby Lee. My love is true and I command you to return.”

Her voice had sounded overly loud in the stillness. She could hear her own nervous breathing as she waited for a sign.

But nothing - nothing was happening. Bobby Lee’s spirit did not appear.

Why? She still loved him. She would always love him.

Priscilla picked up the knife and walked closer to the rift, standing on the very edge. She slashed her wrist again and let the blood fall into the black hole.

“Bobby Lee, come back to me. Come back to me, please.”

Pris felt a slight tremor run underneath her feet. She threw the knife over the line of salt and stepped back from the grave’s edge, fearing that it might give way.

A noise like a small avalanche reached her ears. She shivered as the temperature dropped to freezing.

“Prisssssssssssss. Prisssssscilla.”

That couldn’t be Bobby Lee’s voice. It sounded so deep and strange.

Pris felt like the air was being sucked out of her lungs. She stood paralyzed, listening to the shifting movements of the earth and the guttural utterances that emanated from the rift.

The full Waking Moon lit the scene before her and Pris wanted to look away from the grave, afraid of what she would see, afraid of what she had summoned. But she could only stand there, transfixed and trembling, as the thing she once loved crawled out of the hole and collapsed on its back a few feet in front of her.

What was left of Bobby Lee writhed on the ground, moaning in agony. His hands clawed the air as though he were still trying to dig his way out of the grave.

Pris' eyes welled up with hot tears and she let out a strangled sob. The white T-shirt he'd been wearing the day he died was filthy and streaked with blood. His black jeans were torn and his sneakers were caked in dirt.

And his face…

"Oh, Bobby Lee. I'm so sorry."

She'd thought she would only be summoning his spirit, and he would look as handsome as before. His body shouldn't have been raised. This wasn't supposed to happen.

Priscilla hugged herself and stared down at Bobby Lee's mangled face. His sunken eyes were watching her, reflecting the moonlight and his pain and confusion. She wondered why she couldn't smell the stench of decay - it was like they were trapped in a cold, sterile vacuum.

His mouth opened and closed, his blackened tongue darting sideways. “Prisssssss.”

The moonlight intensified, glowing bright around him, and Priscilla watched, amazed, as his appearance began to change.

The wounds on his face healed first - new skin filling in the gaps and gashes, making him look normal. His dark eyes were perfect again. When his hands and arms were healed, the glowing light around him disappeared.

Bobby Lee struggled to his feet, his eyes filled with fearful questions. He was shaking all over and Pris wanted to take him in her arms.

“Baby, it’s okay now. Please don’t be scared.”

He took a faltering step towards her. “I’m so cold, Pris. What’s wrong with me? I don’t feel right.”

I can’t tell him the truth. I can’t do it. I just want to pretend he’s alive again until it’s time for him to leave.

Pris forced back the tears and smiled. “You were chasing me up the trail, silly, and you had a bad fall and hit your head. That’s why you’re confused.”

Bobby Lee glanced down at his soiled clothing, and then gave her a familiar lopsided grin. “I look like I’ve been to hell and back. Why are you wearing that fancy dress?”

“I wanted to surprise you. We had a date here in this new special place I made just for us.” Priscilla held out her arms. “Come here and let me warm you up.”

"But I'll ruin your - "

"I don't care. I just need to hold you."

He wrapped his arms around her, squeezing her tight. His skin felt icy, but he didn't carry the scent of death. Priscilla thought he smelled of moonlight and wildflowers.

"I can't wait for our weddin' day," Bobby Lee said, stroking her hair. "You're about to make me the proudest man in Russell Fork."

His words tore at her heart. "I've always loved you, Bobby Lee."

"Well, you're gonna find out how much I love you on our weddin' night."

Priscilla let out a squeal as he lifted her off her feet and twirled her around. When he set her down again, she reached up and touched his face.

"Babe, I've missed you so much."

His grin faded. "Missed me? Why? I ain't been gone."

Priscilla couldn't hold back the tears any longer. She turned her head away, hoping he wouldn't notice.

"Hey, look at me, princess. Tell me what's wrong."

She could barely speak. "I needed to see you. I thought it would make things right, but nothing will ever be okay again."

"Now, that's just foolish talk." Bobby Lee bent over and began kissing her face, her mouth, her eyelashes.

Remember, child - the truth is in your tears.

Priscilla gasped and jerked away from Bobby Lee, but when she stared into his eyes, she knew it was too late.

His face wore a puzzled frown, as though he were trying to resurrect an unpleasant memory. He grabbed hold of her arms.

"Pris, tell me it isn't true - what I remember, it can't be true."

She held her breath, unable to utter a sound.

He shook her hard. "Priscilla, answer me."

"Please, stop. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

She tried to back away from him, but his hands gripped her wrists, causing her to cry out in pain.

"You pushed me, Pris. You made me fall into that mountain break. You made my nightmare come true."

His eyes burned with so much anger and betrayal that it made her flinch.

"No, please understand - I didn't know what I was doing. I was so hurt, so mad…I wasn't thinking straight. I saw Kara kissing you that morning and then when we were here together later that day, you lied to me about where you'd been. I thought you were going to call off the wedding."

Pris collapsed to her knees, sobs wracking her body. "I wish I could go back and change everything, but I can't. Please, please forgive me."

He abruptly let go of her. "Why are you bleeding? What magic have you done?"

She shook her head, not wanting to answer. "I had to do it. I had to say goodbye."

Bobby Lee suddenly staggered backwards and let out a pitiful wail. "What's happening? It hurts… I hurt all over."

Pris looked up and saw that the moon had begun its descent in the western sky. Bobby Lee would soon return to his grave.

She stood and approached him slowly. "Shhhh, the pain won't last long. I promise it'll all be over soon."

"No, I can't be dead. Help me stay, Pris. Use your magic again."

"I can't, baby. I'm so sorry."

He clutched his head and moaned. "Noooooooo."

"I'll love you forever," she whispered.

Bobby Lee's skin began to glow in the intense moonlight. His wounds were reappearing - he was changing back into a corpse.

Priscilla covered her ears as his screams rent the air. Why did he have to suffer? It wasn't right.

Bobby Lee teetered on the edge of the rift, struggling against an invisible force that was trying to pull him back into his grave.

"Prisssssssss. For God's sake, help me."

His face reflected so much terror that she couldn't bear it, and she knew there was only one way to end his torment.

Pris ran over to Bobby Lee and gave his chest a violent push. His feet slid backwards into the gaping hole and he fell forward, latching on to the hem of her dress and pulling her to the ground.

"No! Please, don't do this."

She kicked and screamed and managed to break free, but before she could scramble out of his reach, Bobby Lee grabbed a fistful of her long hair and dragged her over to the edge of the chasm. A bone-chilling numbness spread quickly throughout her body and Priscilla stopped struggling. Her lover's dead eyes stared into hers and his slick, swollen lips curved into a grotesque smile.

"I forgive you, princess."

The earth began to tremble and Priscilla closed her eyes. Bobby Lee held her in a desperate embrace as the power of moonlight claimed their bodies, entombing them forever in the darkness of his grave.